

ryo shirakome
takayaki

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
SHORT STORIES





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YUE

A genius vampire mage, and the most important person to Hajime.



NAGUMO HAJIME

A Synergist, and originally the weakest student summoned to Tortus. But he gained immense power after being dropped into the depths of the Great Orcus Labyrinth, and now seeks a way home.

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**FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST**

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS



SHIRASAKI HAORI

A kind priestess who's good at looking after others. Her love for Hajime knows no bounds.



TID CLARENCE

An ancient, wise dragonwoman who is second only to Yue in magical ability. Unfortunately, she's also a masochistic pervert.



SHEA HAULIA

A rabbitgirl who can use special magic. She's also quite skilled at strengthening magic.



HATAYAMA AIKO

Job: Farmer. She's Hajime and the students' teacher, and is known as the Fertility Goddess within Tortus.



MYU

A dagon girl who started calling Hajime "Daddy" after he inadvertently saved her.



YAGASHI SHIZUKU

A skilled swordsman who's a master at reading other people's emotions. She likes looking after people, but it often makes her life harder. She's also Kaori's best friend.



SAKAGAMI RYUTAROU

Job: Monk. A surprisingly tolerant young man who takes things in stride. He's Kouki's childhood friend.



AMANDOGAWA KOUKI

Job: Hero. He has a strong sense of justice, but is often misguided.



LILIANA S. B. HEILIGH

Princess of the Heiligh Kingdom. Kaori and Shizuku were her first friends.



SONDOE YUKA

Job: Acrobat. She's the leader of Ai-chan's bodyguards and has a crush on Hajime.



NAKAMURA ERI

Job: Necromancer. She looks like a quiet and introverted girl, but there's more to her than meets the eye. Her glasses aren't prescription; she wears them for show.



TANIGUCHI SUZU

Job: Barrier Master. The energetic, lively moodmaker of Kouki's party. She's quite tiny.

ENDO HOSUKE

One of the least noticeable people alive.

REMIA

Myu's mother. A beautiful and wise young woman.



MELD LOGGINS

The captain of Heiligh's knights, and a bachelor.

NAGUMO SUMIRE

Hajime's mother. A popular shoujo manga artist.

NAGUMO SHUU

Hajime's father. Owns a game development company.



MILEDI REISEN

Creator of the Reisen Gorge labyrinth, and a master of gravity magic. She's also the most annoying person in existence.

THE LIBERATORS

A group of people who learned the truth behind Ehit and the fact that he moves people around Tortus like pieces on a game board. Their goal was to defeat him and free the world from his tyranny, but in the end they failed. They then created the Seven Great Labyrinths to pass down their techniques to anyone who proved worthy in the hopes that they would complete what the Liberators started.



MEIRU MELUSINE

Creator of the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, and a master of restoration magic. She seems gentle, but is actually a huge sadist.



NAIZ GRUEN

Creator of the Grand Gruen Volcano, and a master of spatial magic. He's the sane one of the group.



OSCAR ORCUS

Creator of the Great Orcus Labyrinth, and a master of creation magic. He has a maid fetish.

Chapter I: Detour Compilation

The Liberators' Game

"Flame master on 12-4 attack the swordsman on 8-6. Flame spear, magical attack, fire element."

"Hmm..."

Within the depths of the Great Orcus Labyrinth, inside Oscar Orcus' private room, a young boy smiled triumphantly while the girl next to him sunk deep into thought. Her voice was oddly seductive. The two people were, of course, Hajime Nagumo and Yue. The two of them were sitting on sofas across from each other, with a transparent table laid out between them. There was a square metallic board on the table, and around 64 pieces laid out on various parts of it. They were enjoying a game of otherworldly chess before bed.

As one might have guessed from the different number of pieces, the rules were slightly different. For one, there were 256 squares on the board. For another, the board was split up into various terrains such as mountains, rivers, forests, hills, plains, and the like, and the pieces were categorized either as magical or physical fighters. Each piece could learn various skills, and the damage they dealt with each attack depended on the skill and element. Players also had to keep track of various resources such as mana.

The most fascinating aspect was that thanks to some magical contraption, the pieces all played out their actions. Even now, Hajime, who was still a beginner at the game, marveled at how his flame master fired a mini-spark at Yue's soldier, who then doubled up in pain screaming, "H-How can this be!" before collapsing. In response, one of Yue's mages moved all on its own to carry the defeated piece off the board while screaming, "So this is how your side does things, huh!?"

"I've been wondering, but is there any way to take off these little cutscene type things?"

"...If you can't do it, Hajime, I don't think anyone left alive can. This is probably the joint work of all the skilled Liberators."

It certainly was impressive. A colossal waste of skill, but impressive nonetheless. Hajime's impression of the Liberators had changed a little when he'd found this.

Now that it was Yue's turn, she sent her knight charging forward to cut down Hajime's flame master. The knight made a splendid show

of spearing the flame master on his lance, crushing him to pieces. A few seconds later, the destroyed pieces of the flame master regenerated and he cheerfully walked himself off the board.

When his flame master was destroyed, Hajime flinched a little. Not because he was sad at losing a piece, but because there was one other interesting feature built into this version of chess called Pain Trace. Each of the two players would register their mana on the game board beforehand, and whenever one player lost a piece, they'd suffer a small static shock.

"Assassin to 13-9. Attack the enemy crusader. Slash, skill, increased critical."

"Nhaah."

Hajime's assassin snuck up behind Yue's crusader and mercilessly beheaded it. As the crusader's head rolled to the ground, Yue's queen cried out in despair.

"My dear knight!"

Next to her, the king bore down on her in an accusatory tone.

"What? My *dear* knight? And just what did you mean by that, huh *dear*?" And so, the queen's adultery was exposed.

After a few more turns it was discovered that the king had his own bastard son, and the mother was none other than the other side's queen. Jealous, Yue's queen had an affair with her court magician, but then later on it was discovered the court magician had a secret lover of his own, and that he was a man, and that man was none other than Hajime's army's court magician. Love blossomed between them, and the whole royal family got involved. Honestly, it felt more like a drama than a chess match.

"Yue, how come you moan like that every time you lose a piece? It's not that painful, is it?"

"...You just keep attacking all of my weak points, Hajime."

"Liar. There's no such... No, wait. For some reason today the shock's always been focused on my—"

"Fufufu, that was all my doing. I turned on the feature that probes the player's subconscious and stimulates the one place they feel it the most. I found out about it in the user's manual. By the way, you can control the voltage output too, and I set it to max today."

Hajime suddenly shivered. The user's manual was 500 pages long, so he hadn't had the patience to read more than a few of them. He wasn't sure if she just read through the whole thing, or if she found all the features she wanted by accident, but Yue now had an advantage over him.

But what was truly frightening was that every time he lost a piece, Hajime could feel his family jewels tingle. *S-So that's what she was after.* Thanks to his resistances, the shocks had been mostly mitigated,

but with how seductively Yue was moaning every time she lost a piece, it was only a matter of time before his little man decided to poke its head out. No matter how superior his army was, he wouldn't be able to win at this rate. Thus, Hajime raised his voice, eager to end this as quickly as possible.

"Earth master to 16-7. Line attack from 16-8 to 16-10. Rock slide, magical attack, earth element, advanced skill."

He was sacrificing his ability to move for a few turns by carrying out this AoE attack. As the attack went off, Yue moaned once more, falling limp on the sofa after the shock finally ran its course. She was twitching a little now, and her black one piece shuffled up a little to reveal her bare legs.

"Sorry, Yue, but I'm taking this one. I can't afford to lose when my dignity as a man is at stake."

"...Mmm, so you're finally coming at me seriously."

Beads of sweat were forming on Yue's forehead and her cheeks were slightly flushed. After thinking for a moment, she proposed something interesting:

"If you're so sure of this game, how about we make a little bet?"

Hajime warily questioned her for further details, and Yue said that the winner could make any one request they wanted of the loser. Apparently Yue's request would be that they wear a matching set of clothes one day after they made it back to the surface.

While the mini-soldiers down below were yelling death threats at each other and waging a violent war for survival, Hajime and Yue were discussing their next date. It felt utterly surreal. It also really broke the tension. For his part, Hajime didn't want to do something so embarrassing, so he made an audacious move.

"Queen to 14-5! Activate the queen's special ability, Ruler's blessing!"

He risked sending his strongest piece into the line of fire in order to allow all his nearby pieces to do a coordinated, simultaneous attack. All of his units within a certain amount of tiles began attacking at once! The king's illegitimate child died during the battle! Yue's king and Hajime's queen both lamented his loss greatly, but the battle still raged on! And lastly, Yue's moans grew louder than ever before!

That battle ended up becoming the turning point for the game, and eventually Yue was defeated. Yue's king and Hajime's queen's love story continued, and they ended up impaling each other on their swords. Finally, Hajime's king, who hadn't spoken a word during the entire play, declared his side's victory and the game was over.

Hajime breathed a sigh of relief, glad he wouldn't be embarrassing himself on the surface anymore. But because Yue was pouting, he ended up compromising anyway and agreed to wear any one outfit

she requested of him, improving her mood instantly. *So this is what they mean when they say you've won the battle, but lost the war.*

As always, Hajime could never win against Yue.

A Man's Dream

"To me, research is whatever I can pour the most of my passion and enthusiasm into."

Those were the words written at the beginning of his research notebook. The faded gray binding and peeling yellow pages spoke of the book's age, while the numerous smudges and ink blots spoke of its extensive use. Such wear and tear spoke just as much about its owner's passion as the words written down in it.

Every single page was crammed to the margins with neat, slender handwriting. Research results, hypotheses, experiments; they were all recorded between the dull gray covers. But at the very end was a footnote whose very letters seemed steeped in frustration with the way they were written. It told of how the owner of this notebook had been unable to complete his research.

"Unfortunately, I was unable to achieve the ideal that I sought. I suspect most of it is that guy's fault. Actually no, I'm sure of it. It's all that damn bastard's fault."

Halfway through, the note went from being solemnly written to a grade schooler's whining. But if one has the forbearance to ignore such childish writing and turn the page, this is how it continues:

"To whoever ends up finding my notebook, I pray that you, like me, are one who chases after the truth. I leave all of my research behind in the hopes that you will complete what I could not. That you will be able to achieve the ideals I sought. I beg of you, don't let my research end in vain."

A faint, "Hmmm" broke the silence as the boy reading the notebook finished the last sentence. He closed the book with a slight thump and gazed up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

"Don't worry, I'll clear up any lingering regrets you have. I'll inherit your will and finish what you started."

The boy's whispered mutterings were soon swallowed up by the vast silence of the room, but the determination behind them lingered. From the corner of the room, a pair of lifeless, mechanical eyes quietly watched over the boy.

Clanking noises echoed throughout the room. Hajime Nagumo was currently engrossed in putting together a plethora of newly crafted mechanical parts. He was sitting in Oscar Orcus' workshop, located at the very bottom of the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

Gouts of crimson mana illuminated the room at odd intervals as

he continued transmuting. There was a golden-haired beauty sitting next to him, watching the whole spectacle. At the same time, her slender fingers were skillfully sewing something. Said beauty was none other than Yue—the vampire princess Hajime had rescued in the depths of hell.

While Hajime was busy checking over his new equipment, Yue was putting the finishing touches on their wardrobe. She had sewn them some sturdy travel clothes, some more comfortable everyday wear, and even some more suggestive outfits for their night adventures. Sewing had become like second nature to her after so many days spent practicing.

“...Perfect, it’s done.”

Hajime’s satisfied voice echoed throughout the quiet room. Yue stopped what she was doing to look over at him, and saw that he was experimentally flexing his artificial arm.

“You finished your arm upgrades?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna give it a test run. Wanna watch?”

“Okay.”

The artifact Hajime had created combined his knowledge of modern weaponry with his game sense and the magic of this world to create something truly fearsome. Because it all used knowledge from another world, Yue found each and every one of his inventions to be fascinating. It had been even more exciting recently, as ever since Hajime had finished transmuting all the necessities they’d need for their journey, he’d been spending a long time thinking about what else to add to his arm to make life simpler.

Hajime made a metallic fist with his hand and thrust it out toward one of the practice targets lying around the workshop. Though it was still a bit rough around the edges, his fist boasted quite a large amount of firepower.

He grinned playfully as he saw how excited Yue was.

“Here we go! This is every man’s dream! Rocket punch!” With a low bang, his left fist burst out of its socket and flew toward the target. It left a trail of sparks in its wake as it rocketed forward. Then, with a thunderous crash, the fist pulverized its target.

Hajime grinned like a little boy and poured mana into his left arm. As if connected by an invisible thread, his hand zoomed back into place. There was a satisfying robotic clunk as it reattached itself to his arm.

“What do you think?” Hajime asked Yue. He was certain she must have been just as moved as he was. However...

“...That’s it?” All he received was a somewhat puzzled reply. If anything, she seemed a little disappointed, even. Her indifference left Hajime nearly speechless.

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘that’s it’? Wasn’t that amazing? I just threw out a rocket punch! It’s the kind of awesome move that one-shots your enemy and then comes flying back to you!”

“But... your railgun’s stronger.”

Hajime was left scrambling, trying to explain the appeal of his rocket punch, but he only succeeded in leaving Yue even more confused. Her unintentionally cutting reply left him mentally defeated.

At a loss for words, Hajime could only stare blankly at Yue for a few minutes before going, “Wait, there’s still more!” and suddenly smiling.

“It’s true that it doesn’t have much power compared to the railgun, but there’s a huge surprise factor associated with having a fist suddenly come flying at your face.”

“But the railgun’s faster, too. Wouldn’t it be an even better surprise attack?”

Another flawless rebuttal. Hajime was swaying unsteadily, but he wasn’t down yet! He refused to abandon his romantic notions of the rocket punch.

“I-It’ll come in handy in case I ever lose my weapon!”

“So losing your hand as well counts as coming in handy?”

“.....”

“Besides, even if you did lose your gun, it’d be faster to use Supersonic Step to get in close and hit them directly with your Steel Arms skill or something.”

Hajime detached his left hand and threw it to the ground. He then reached into his Treasure Trove and pulled out a different left hand before smiling dangerously at Yue and brandishing his new hand.

“Fine, Yue. Challenge accepted.”

“...What? I’m sorry Hajime, I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“You might be right, the rocket punch might just be a little too weak a weapon for me, though I’m sure for *anyone* else it would be perfect... but anyway, let me show you my other new weapon. Feel free to faint in awe at any time.”

“...Umm, I still don’t—”

Yue was only getting more confused by Hajime’s nonsensical declarations. But for the sake of a man’s dream, he couldn’t back down. He started pouring mana into his arm, and his hand started glowing a hot red. His fist was burning bright with the heat of a man’s dreams. This was his second new weapon.

“Heat knuckle!” Hajime’s expression was as dazzling as his blazing fist. However...

“Umm... so what else does it do?” For some reason, Yue was asking for more. She was scratching her cheek awkwardly, and it was clear her soul had not been in the least bit moved by Hajime’s

stunning display.

Hajime's smile stiffened a little.

"...Okay, so see here, Yue. This is a fist that can melt literally anything it touches. Isn't it cool?"

"...Why melt them when you can just kill them?"

A very apt question. Hajime's brute strength and skills would be more than enough to annihilate most enemies. There was no need to add insult to injury and melt the opponent too. In fact, his vibration cannon and railgun were already strong enough. That was why most of his previous additions to his arm had been developed with convenience in mind more than anything else.

However, somewhere along the way he had let his boyish dreams get the better of him, and had started adding these useless features. Now he had to stare down Yue and prove their worth. Hajime turned off his heat knuckle and put both hands on Yue's slender shoulders.

"Think about it, Yue. What if we have to fight something that resists physical attacks really well, like that scorpion from before? If I have this, just touching it will still cause it damage. Or if we somehow get trapped inside a dungeon somewhere, this'll help us quickly dig our way out."

"...Okay."

Yue could feel the passionate fervor in Hajime's voice. But still, she thought to herself, *Couldn't you just use Lightning Field or Transmutation or something to get us out of those situations anyway?*

She didn't say it aloud this time though, realizing it must have been important to him somehow. And because she loved him, Yue smiled awkwardly and tried to reassure Hajime's flagging confidence.

"...Y-Yeah it's pretty cool."

"....."

Hajime wordlessly took off this hand too, then threw it to the ground. Clearly, he wasn't looking for sympathy. Undaunted, he pulled yet another hand out of his Treasure Trove. He gave Yue a smile that screamed, "This one'll knock your socks off for sure!" and activated it. This hand turned his arm into a drill.

"Behold, Yue, my final form! Everything you saw before was nothing more than the prelude. Be swept away in a torrent of emotion as you regale my final arm!"

His speech was getting more and more cringeworthy by the second, though he wasn't aware of it himself. He then poured mana into his arm, activating the third of his "real men's weapons" series—

"This is the power of my transforming drill!"

He looked over at Yue triumphantly while his drill-arm began spinning. *This time for sure, she has to be impressed.* Or so he thought.

"...Yeah. It's cool. It's okay, you can stop now."

“.....” There was an almost cruel kindness in Yue’s eyes as she gently told Hajime it was okay.

As far as Yue was concerned, all of his new items seemed pointless. That being said, there was no telling what the future had in store for them, so maybe even useless looking things might have some value later down the road. Surely their time to shine would come eventually. Deep inside her heart, Yue hoped it would, for Hajime’s sake if nothing else.

However, Yue’s pity only served to put cracks in Hajime’s pure heart. *Don’t tell me I’m actually becoming some kind of delusional idiot?*

No matter what the truth was, a bullet, once fired, could never be taken back. Half desperate, he started taking out all the other arms he’d developed. Among them were a dragon-shaped hand, one that fired water blasts from its fingers, and even one that transformed his left arm into Squall’s gunblade. But the only reaction any of those ever elicited from Yue was a pitying smile.

Finally, Hajime crumbled into a sobbing heap, and Yue simply sat there patting his head, saying, “It’s okay. It’s okay.” She comforted him until he finally regained his senses.

Just what, exactly, she had meant by “It’s okay” was something he didn’t want to think too deeply about.

It was late at night. There was a single figure working in the darkness, inside a hidden room whose entrance was covered by a shelf.

“It’s finally done,” Hajime muttered softly. Sitting before him was a silver-haired girl. One could tell with just a glance that she wasn’t human. Where her ears would have been were instead metal rectangles that kind of resembled antennas.

Her hard, metallic eyes bore no signs of sentience, either. That was only natural though, as she was a cleaning golem Oscar had made long ago.

However, her features were still quite human. She had on a navy blue one-piece dress and a pure white apron. There was a headdress adorning her hair as well. In a word, she was a maid.

“Oscar. It was because you dreamed of making her real that you strayed so far from reality. That was your mistake. However, I have the knowledge granted to me by the 2D world. By making her somewhat unrealistic, she grows closer to the ideal... This is the answer you sought after for so long!”

Hajime whispered to himself triumphantly. Anyone who had seen him at that moment would have been pretty creeped out by him. However, his passion for this maid golem was real. When he had first discovered Oscar’s notebook and this golem, he had decided to inherit

Oscar's pure spirit of inquiry and complete what Oscar had begun. He had worked on her late into every night, making sure Yue didn't find out. He surely deserved a few moments to admire his own craftsmanship after all the hardships he went through to complete her.

However, as he was basking in his own handiwork—

“...Found you, Hajime.”

Light filled the room as he heard a familiar voice call his name. He jumped with a start, then stiffly turned to look back at Yue.

“Y-Yue... what are you doing here? I could have sworn I felt your presence in the bedroom still.”

“I was wondering where you were going every night. Not only did you sneak away using Hide Presence, you even left behind an artifact that faked your presence, too. I didn't think there'd be a secret room here... but fortunately this artifact helped me find you.”

“So you used my own artifact against me.”

Hajime ground his teeth, angry at his own carelessness. In the meantime, Yue gazed silently at the maid golem. Hajime gulped guiltily. He felt like a husband caught cheating on his wife.

“Hajime, if you liked maid uniforms you just had to tell me.” There was a little jealousy in her tone. It seemed she really was jealous of this inanimate golem. However, it wasn't what she was thinking. In order to clear up the misunderstanding, Hajime began explaining himself.

“Yue, allow me to explain. I don't actually have a thing for maid uniforms. This is about art.”

“...Art?”

“Correct. A maid that's also a golem. In other words, a golem maid is every man's dream. Those two factors combined are what make it art. Just a maid or just a golem are nothing on their own. While they may have a certain appeal, only when put together as a golem maid do they become a true object of worship for men worldwide.”

As he spoke, Hajime grew more and more heated with his words. Yue listened to it all seriously and nodded knowingly once he'd finished. “I understand,” was all she said. Hajime let out a relieved smile, but then an instant later a blazing fireball flew past his cheek.

There was a thunderous explosion, and Hajime quickly turned around to see his precious golem maid burned to ashes.

“H-How could you...”

Hajime crumbled to his knees as he gazed upon the charred husk of what had once been a golem maid. Then he turned to Yue, who had started casually walking away, and asked in a voice full of sadness, “Yue, why? Why would you do that? What did that poor golem ever do to you?”

“You’ve been acting weird recently, Hajime. You needed a little traini— Ahem, I mean lesson.”

It was true that Hajime’s obsessions with things that were “every man’s dream” was starting to get a bit excessive. It might have been brought on in part due to the dead end he’d hit in regards to his transmutation, but if he didn’t drag himself back to reality, he’d be stuck in a fantasy land forever. The fact that he was actually sad at the destruction of an inanimate golem was proof enough that he was already almost too far gone.

Having the girl he loved tell him “you’ve been acting weird” to his face brought him back to his senses, though. Meanwhile, Yue picked up one of the maid uniforms lying around and brought it up to see if it would fit. She did a little twirl and licked her lips seductively as she looked at Hajime. Her sex drive was in full throttle.

Her next words blew away whatever might have survived of Hajime’s reason.

“Shall I teach you just how much better a real maid is than a mechanical one, Master?”

“.....” Cold sweat ran down his forehead.

For hours later, Hajime’s screams could be heard echoing throughout the bottom of hell. Thanks to the loving embrace of Yue, Hajime was able to return from the depths of his delusions.

A Nightmare in the Abyss

Two people were standing around, facing each other in a vast hall that looked like a grand temple. One of them was wearing flowing silvery robes with matching silver hair, and had in their hand a silver sword to match. The other was dressed in all black, had an eyepatch, and a prosthetic arm. The black-clothed figure had a revolver in their hands.

“I congratulate you on making it this far, Madness Parade of the Crimson Fang. Or would you prefer I call you Chaos Disaster?”

“Hmph, call me what you will. That name is naught but what others have heaped upon me. Though I am willing to admit my capacity for destruction rivals such a moniker. You shall meet your demise here, God of Origin. Or would you too prefer to be called by your more commonplace name, Chaos of Darkness?”

—*Holy crap, why do these names sound so nonsensically cringy?*

The black-robed man tore off his eyepatch to reveal a dazzlingly blue eye.

“Now is the time to awaken, my steel-clad demonic arm!”

At the same time as he shouted out, the silver-clad figure grew silver wings from their back and their silver sword glowed with a

distinctively silver light.

“Very well. I admire your arrogance. Few so brazenly challenge god. As a reward, I shall engrave eternal suffering into the essence of your very soul!” That was all the silver figure shouted back.

Oh my god, it just keeps getting worse.

As their fight began, the black-clad man screamed out an incantation.

“Oh crimson flash, heed mine call and devour thy foes— Crimson Cutter: Sacrosanct Resonance!”

The silver-haired man replied in kind, then shouted out one spell.

“Hmph, pathetic... Return all of creation to the primordial abyss— Karmic Absolution!”

They continued going back and forth like that for some time, their intense attacks creating a grand battle that would probably be the only one of its kind.

I can't take it anymore... Make it stop, please.

Finally, after the silver-clad man's third transformation, the black-robed man had awoken to his ultimate true power, and they had unleashed not only both of their trump cards but both of their finishing moves. Then, the black-clad figure let out a resounding cry of victory. He smiled triumphantly, covered from head to toe in wounds no mere mortal could ever hope to withstand...

“Heh, that was quite the enjoyable fight. In deference to your formidable strength, I shall grant you a gift to take with you to the afterlife. My true name, the name no one else knows... I am the Crimson Flame White Demon's—”

Please, just kill me now. Anything, anything to make it stooooooooop.

“Make it stoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooop!”

“Hajime!? What's wrong, are you okay?”

Deep within the labyrinth, Hajime threw off the sheets covering him and leaped to his feet, his breathing rough. Yue also got up in a panic and gently hugged Hajime in order to calm him down.

“Th-That was a terrifying nightmare... Yue, can I ask you something?”

“...What?”

“If I ever start becoming one of those delusional crazies, use your Azure Blaze to bring me back to my senses, please.”

Yue realized Hajime must still have been suffering from the effects of the nightmare, as whatever he was saying didn't make any sense. Still, she nodded in order to reassure him.

“...Okay. Leave it to me. If you ever start becoming one of those delusional crazies, I'll make sure to stop you.”

Neither of them realized they had been misunderstood by the other, Hajime talking about the sight from his dreams and Yue about

him becoming a monster, but... Hajime calmed down after that, which was enough to satisfy Yue, so they both went back to sleep in each other's arms.

As long as Yue was around, Hajime was safe from falling over to that side... probably.

The Holy Goddess' Descent unto Paradise

The abundance of goods lining every shelf and bookcase made the interior of the store feel rather cramped, despite the rather large amount of floor space. In the background, a popular anime song was playing, loud enough to be heard but not enough to be obtrusive. This store was famous nationwide for its selection of anime, manga, and other such products.

Naturally, the inside of the store was filled with pilgrims making the trek to this holy land. Most of them could be classified either as "warriors" or as "gentlemen." A few of them had brought their friends along as well, and the store was filled to the brim with heated arguments about who was best girl or what the anime of the season was.

Within that eternal battlefield there existed a single haven of peace and quiet. At the very back of the store was a special section roped off behind a pair of curtains. A big "No minors allowed" sign was printed on each curtain. As one may have guessed, it was the adult section of the store.

No matter how hardened a veteran one was, their voices naturally grew hushed as they entered, and they instantly began worrying about the gazes of others around them. Even the anime song playing in the background seemed stifled in such hallowed ground.

However, today, that tranquil atmosphere was abruptly shattered.

"W-Wait, Kaori. You can't just go in there!"

"B-But Shizuku-chan..."

Two girls' voices interrupted the silence. Their clear, high-pitched tone sounded just like the ringing of a bell. The warriors within all dropped what they were doing and timidly peeked out from behind their shelves. There was a single slender, feminine finger poking in from behind the curtains.

The men present all simultaneously thought, *Wait, don't tell me she's coming in here!? Damn, that means there's no way out!*

"No buts. The all-ages version is sold out, so just give it a rest already."

"But... Nagumo-kun's father's company made this game. What if Nagumo-kun also played the... e-eighteen plus version of the game?"

"L-Look here. You wanted to get this game so you'd have

something to talk about with Nagumo-kun, right? Are you planning on talking about the s-sex scenes with him in class or something? I think he's more likely to run in the opposite direction if you try. Though maybe not for the reasons you think."

In order to have something to talk about with her crush, Hajime Nagumo, Kaori had come here today to buy the game Hajime's father had produced. However, because of its overwhelming popularity, the all-ages version was already sold out everywhere, and there were only a few copies of the 18+ version left. And even that was only because a few of the stores had accidentally ordered more stock than they had intended.

Considering her age, Kaori wouldn't be able to buy the 18+ version anyway, but straightforward and fearless as she was, she was still determined to try.

"I-I know. But still... don't try and stop me, Shizuku-chan! Sometimes a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do!"

"Yes, but this isn't that time. Hey, no, wait, stop!"

There was a collective intake of breath as the warriors witnessed a girl burst through the curtains. For a moment everyone was at a loss for words, but then the muttered whispering began.

"Holy shit, she's hot..." and the like.

The first sight that greeted Kaori as she barged into the 18+ section was a full size poster of a scantily-clad girl. She blushed to the tips of her ears, and then hurriedly looked down when she saw the dumbfounded gaze of every man in the section focused on her. Shizuku, who was standing behind her, grabbed her arm and tried to pull her out. However, Kaori wouldn't be deterred, and with her misguided resolution she said, "I-I won't lose here!" before taking another step into the forbidden sanctuary.

Shizuku kept desperately trying to pull Kaori back, but she was too embarrassed to be able to utilize much of her strength. And so, she was unwillingly dragged along behind Kaori, like a little girl lost in another world.

"Ah. S-Shizuku-chan, I found it!"

"W-What? Can you please stop dragging me farther in?"

Heedless of her pleas, Kaori continued dragging Shizuku, who had tears in her eyes, deeper into the holy land until she reached the game she sought. As she picked it up and looked at the cover, Shizuku suddenly let out an embarrassed squeal. The reason, of course, being that there were a lot of girls in suggestive poses plastered on the front.

Shizuku quickly averted her gaze, but Kaori nonchalantly flipped the box over to see what was on the backside. As she examined the illustrations, she said something terribly tactless without much thought.

“H-Huh? Shizuku-chan, don’t you think this girl looks a lot like you?”

“What!? D-Don’t be ridiculous! I would never get on all fours with my butt sticking out like that!”

Shizuku, diligent as always, made sure to actually look before retorting, even though it made her blush bright red. However, her voice had been slightly louder than intended, and there was suddenly a spray of red as someone collapsed behind a shelf. That was soon followed by a shrill scream of “Don’t die on me, man! Damn, the bleeding just won’t stop!” It appeared someone had a bit too overactive an imagination.

“B-Besides, don’t you think this girl looks a lot like you, Kaori?”

“No way! I-I’d never do something so embarrassing as get on top of a man looking like that!”

There was another fountain of red as a second man collapsed from behind a different shelf. A second later someone screamed out, “Medic! I need a medic!”

It was then that a savior descended among the gathering of hardened warriors.

“Excuse me, miss. I’m sorry, but you need to at least be eighteen to purchase these goods. Can I kindly ask you to leave?”

It was the advent of the manager. The thirty-something manager had decided it would be bad for business if a part of his store got turned into a mountain of corpses, and had wisely chosen to interfere. The remaining warriors were all certain his authority would be enough to deter the two interlopers.

However, their opponent was stronger than any of them had realized. Shizuku was bowing her head furiously in apology, her words choked with tears, as she tried to drag Kaori out of the section. However, Kaori was not so easily turned away. Even with tears streaking down her face, she still thrust the game box out at the manager and made her request.

“I-I’d like to buy this, preashe!”

The manager’s expression faltered and he tried to insist that you needed to be eighteen to purchase this product, but Kaori came back with a most unexpected counter.

“I-It’s for my dad!”

What kind of dad would make their daughter buy their porn!

Everyone present thought the same thing. Kaori herself must have realized how flimsy an excuse it was, as she then continued, saying things like “It’s his birthday present!” and “We were going to play it together!” Her excuses only made things worse, though. At this point Shizuku was so embarrassed that she buried her face in her hands, wishing she were dead. Finally, Kaori ended things with a, “Please,

won't you let me buy it?" Her puppy dog eyes and pleading drove the manager to his limits.

"Excuse me for a moment." That was all the manager said before running behind a shelf and spurting out a torrential nosebleed. He was just as much of an otaku as anyone else there, and thus just as susceptible to Kaori's charms. Wails of "Bossssssssss!" could be heard coming from the few warriors who were still left standing.

On that day, in her quest to purchase a single game, Kaori piled up a mountain of corpses of both customers and store clerks alike.

Dreams of Family

The pleasant aroma of grilled meat and soy sauce wafted through the air. There was a forty-odd year old lady standing in the kitchen, an apron wrapped around her waist and her hair tied back in a ponytail.

The woman, Sumire Nagumo, was busy skillfully preparing a meal. She raised her head up to the ceiling and yelled.

"Hajime, Dear, it's feeding time!"

After a brief silence, a pair of footsteps could be heard heading down the stairs.

"Can you please just call it dinner like a normal person, Mom?" Hajime Nagumo displayed an annoyed face as he entered the kitchen... There were dark bags under his gentle eyes. He took a peek at what his mom had made while helping her set the table, and his eyes began to sparkle.

"Awesome, you made Hamburg steak today. No wonder the house smelled so good."

Hajime's father, Nagumo Shuu, popped in with his two cents. He was a slender man with short, cropped hair. Like his son, he too had bags under his eyes.

The pair finished setting the table and eagerly dug into the meal Sumire had prepared for them. They stuffed their mouths with Hamburg steak and white rice as if they were starving men. Sumire giggled as she watched them eat and muttered words of disagreement.

"No, I think feeding time suits you two just perfectly. Well, did you two manage to meet your deadline with that debugging?"

"Mmmgh... Mmnch... Yeah, somehow. That game's really cool."

"Gulp... It better be. The future of my company's riding on that game. Do you have any idea how much we poured into development? I'd be out of a job if the game wasn't cool. Though I guess if I lost my job I could spend all my time playing games trying to figure out where I went wrong."

"Dad, they call those people NEETs."

“Not a NEET, son, a shut-in. Shut-ins that can make a living for themselves are what we call winners in life,” Shuu riposted brilliantly. Such was his philosophy. The mother was no better in that regard, however.

“Indeed,” she replied. This was the result of having a father who ran a game company and a mother who was a shoujo mangaka. Their mindsets weren’t exactly normal.

In fact, when they had learned that Hajime was being bullied at school, their advice, if it could be called that, had just been along the same lines.

“Do what you want. If you want to transfer, transfer. If you want to fight back, fight back. If you want to become a shut-in, become a shut-in. Hell, get yourself expelled for all I care, I’ll hire you. It doesn’t matter if you’re a high-school dropout or have 10 PhDs, the ones making money in the end are the winners.”

Hajime was of a more practical bent, though.

“It’s important to have backup plans to secure financial stability, so school’s super important.” Only in this household would you find a child telling their parents the importance of staying in school.

But, well, I’m glad Mom and Dad are like that, because it would have been awkward if they made a huge deal out of the whole thing.

Meanwhile, his parents were having a truly absurd conversation.

“I’m starting to think our son’s got some lolicon tendencies in him.”

“He certainly does like loli characters.” He quickly brought his thoughts back to the present and gave his parents a simmering glare.

“Hey, hey, no need to glare at us like that. You’re the one who added a blonde loli mage to the game, not me,” said Shuu.

“So, that doesn’t make me a lolicon. You’re a grown man, you should be able to tell the difference between games and reality,” Hajime replied.

“True, you’re into animal ears too. Especially rabbit ears. I’m glad my son grew up to be a patrician of such fine taste,” Sumire also chimed in.

Hajime sulkily returned to his dinner while his parents grinned at him. They ganged up on their only son like that pretty often.

“I guarantee you you’d party up with a loli if you ever got summoned to another world. Just remember, attacking underage girls is still a crime. I’m sure even other worlds have laws against sex with children. They’ve been cracking down on it in games here recently, even.”

“Don’t just go around making your own assumptions. And can you please stop calling me a lolicon?”

Fed up with his parents’ teasing, Hajime got a little testy.

Realizing he went a little too far with his teasing, his father apologized while laughing.

“But you’re a healthy young boy, so I’m sure you’re interested in all those fantasy worlds with swords and magic. Isn’t going on adventures with a cute heroine, falling in love, and finally defeating the gods or the demon lord or whatever something you dream of?”

“That does sound like the kind of thing a lot of guys would like. And those reincarnated into another world or summoned to another world light novels are getting pretty popular recently. I wouldn’t want our son to get summoned, though. What would we do if he couldn’t ever come back?”

Sumire sank deep into thought, taking the idea of Hajime being summoned rather seriously. Both of them had an overactive imagination, which Hajime supposed were just occupational hazards. He smiled awkwardly while watching them seriously worry over his potential disappearance into another world.

“I don’t think I have what it takes to save the world anyway.”

Shuu wasn’t happy with his son’s self-deprecating attitude.

“You could at least pretend to be the strongest in your head, you know?”

Hajime’s smile grew even more troubled, but he responded with confidence.

“I’m sure all I’d be capable of is making it back home. And if I found someone important to me, I’d probably just bring them back too. I might not be able to save the world, but I’d definitely come back.”

“.....” His parents suddenly brought their heads together. He shrugged his shoulders to hide his embarrassment before continuing.

“Besides, I only like other worlds when they stay inside books and games.” For once, his parents didn’t bully him, and simply smiled kindly.

“That’s right. Staying safe is more important than saving the world. But if you were strong enough to save it on your way back, you might as well, right? Hmm, maybe I should make a game that has a protagonist like that...”

“Oh, that does sound like a good idea. There’s a kind of surreal aspect to it when the protagonist’s only interested in going home but he beats the demon lord and the gods and all that along the way.”

Their creative urges got the better of them, and their conversation turned toward how they could use this idea in their works. While he might sometimes lament that his parents only ever thought about their hobby-jobs, he too was their son, and started contributing ideas of his own to their discussion. That was just another day at the Nagumo household.

With a faint groan, Shuu opened his eyes and looked up at the moonlight streaming through the window.

“...What’s wrong, Dear?”

“Sumire... I had a dream about Hajime. It was about when we were talking about other worlds a few days before he disappeared.”

Sumire propped herself up on the bed and reassured her depressed husband.

“He’ll come back home... I’m sure of it. No matter where he went, even if it is another world, I’m sure he’ll find a way home.”

“Sumire...”

“Trust me. He normally just tries to get by without rocking the boat, but if there’s something he really believes in, then he’ll chase after it with all his might. That’s why I know he’ll be fine.”

“...You’re right. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

The two of them huddled closer together, thinking about their son who’d vanished along with an entire class full of students.

Around the same time, Hajime groggily opened his eyes deep within the abyss. He stared off into the distance, his features illuminated by the light of the fake moon. Yue sidled closer to him, her gaze questioning.

“I was having a dream about Mom and Dad. I can’t believe all those ridiculous things we joked about really came true...”

“...Hajime, it’ll be okay. As long as we’re together, we can do anything. We’ll return to your world for sure.” Yue smiled reassuringly at Hajime, her voice full of conviction. He patted her head lovingly, then nodded back.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’re going to make it back for sure.”

For just a moment, an image of his parents hugging each other flashed through Hajime’s mind. They were hugging each other sadly, both of them thinner than he remembered. For some reason, they both looked up when he mentioned his resolve, as if they’d heard him.

The image of his parents smiled a little, and it seemed like they’d gone back a little to their old selves... Or so he thought, anyway.

HALLOWEEN?

“Umm, uhh... how do I look, Nagumo-kun?” The classroom was quite noisy, even though classes had ended for the day. In one corner of the room, Hajime stiffened up. As if a cute ghost had just cast a curse on him.

“Y-you l-look really cute. That’s a nekomata costume, right, Shirasaki-san? That cat apparition thing?” Hajime somehow managed to regain enough of his composure to answer Kaori’s question.

Her nekomata costume consisted of a yukata and a pair of cat ears and a cat tail. She blushed happily at Hajime's words, making her already adorable countenance reach levels of cuteness that should be classified as a weapon of mass destruction. Half the boys in the class were already bleeding fountains from their noses, while the girls looked on coldly.

Kaori wasn't wearing this because it was a hobby of hers or anything, but because today was Halloween. After many meetings, in which the guys kept on pushing their agenda so that they could see Shizuku and Kaori in cute costumes, the student council had decided to hold a Halloween tea event. A short ways away, Shizuku was putting the finishing touches on her Dracula costume. Many of the girls came up to admire her, and Shizuku was laughing happily with them about their costumes.

As Kaori had made a beeline for Hajime the moment she'd finished changing, many of the other guys in the class were glaring angrily at him. Their monster outfits and monstrous gazes made Hajime wonder if he would be stuck in an actual Halloween nightmare tonight.

"Oh yeah, Nagumo-kun. Shizuku-chan and I were thinking of doing an after-party at her place once this is over, would you like to come, too?" The guys' gazes grew even more hateful. The stares said it all. "Only Shizuku, Kaori, Ryutarou, and Kouki are going to be at that after-party. How come you get to go even though you're not her childhood friend like they are? You better not say yes."

It looked like tonight's Halloween party wouldn't end peacefully. And it was all the cat-eared Kaori's fault.

"Oh, sorry, but I've got something I need to do after this."

"I see. That's a shame, but I guess there's nothing to be done if you're busy. So, can we at least hang out during the party, then? Halloween only comes once a year after all." The way she'd phrased that so casually while putting her hands together like she was pleading belied how crafty Kaori actually was. Had Hajime not felt the immediate threat to his life surrounding him from all sides he would have agreed instantly.

"S-Sorry. I-I already made plans..." Hajime slowly backed away, making sure his retreat path was clear, while refusing as politely as he could. Kaori furrowed her brows, unaware of the army of monsters closing in on Hajime.

"You already have plans? Hey, Nagumo-kun, would those plans happen to be with a girl? Well?"

"Huh? No, of course not. Ahaha..." Hajime felt chills run down his spine and quickly denied the accusation. Kaori let out a sigh of relief, but then slumped her shoulders the next second. She was still

disappointed that he wasn't going with her. One of the nearby guys dressed like a wolf let out a truly wolfish growl. At this point he may have already transformed into a monster on the inside too.

Kaori bounced back pretty quickly. After all, it wasn't like her to stay down. Suddenly, her eyes glowed and she took out her smartphone.

"Then we can at least take a picture, right? You know, to commemorate the occasion."

"Yeah, that's fine." In reality it wasn't fine at all, but he couldn't refuse her any further. Kaori smiled happily.

"Alright then, say 'cheese!'" She grabbed Hajime's arm and squeezed in next to him. Hajime understood it was necessary for taking the picture, but... he was treading on thin ice as it was, and she'd just dumped a space heater on it.

"Shirasaki-san, I'm sorry, but can we do the picture later!?"

"Huh? What? Nagumo-kun! Where are you going!?"

Hajime ran out of the room like his life depended on it, which it quite well might have, as the horde of monsters chased after him the instant he left the classroom.

"I can't take it anymore, who does that fucker think he is!?"

"Grrrrrr!"

"Nagumoooo! Say your prayers!"

"Awoooooo!"

The boys chasing him all yelled out various battle cries. Some of them didn't even sound human anymore.

"Holy crap that's scary. Why do your eyes all look so bloodshot? And why are you running on all fours!?" Hajime's screams continued to echo throughout the school for a long time after that.

"So yeah, that's what happened. I swear, some of those guys had to have been possessed or something." Hajime finished telling his story to Shea and Yue in between mouthfuls of pumpkin mash. They were eating dinner in the inn's common room. The reason that story had come back to him was because the pumpkin he'd been served had been carved in the spitting image of a jack-o'-lantern. There didn't seem to be any corresponding holiday here in Tortus, though. This particular inn just seemed to have a peculiar way of preparing food. Most of it stemmed from the innkeeper's hobbies.

"Oh, your homeland has some interesting customs, Hajime-san. I can't imagine anyone here would willingly wear a monster costume. They'd probably be branded a heretic by the Holy Church."

"Yeah... it looks like your world has more freedom in it than ours. But the important thing here is that... Hajime, you lusted after other girls."

“Hah!? Oh yeah, that’s true! I can’t believe you got seduced so easily by cat ears, Hajime-san, that’s pathetic! Besides, rabbit ears are the greatest animal ears in this world!”

It looked like he’d brought unnecessary trouble onto himself by reminiscing about the past. Faltering underneath the two girls’ accusatory glares, Hajime quickly changed the subject.

“By the way, the tradition is for kids to dress up as monsters and go around to people’s houses yelling ‘Trick or Treat.’ The idea is that adults have to give them candy or they’ll get pranked, so kids end up with mountains of it by the end of the night.”

“I see,” Yue muttered. She then whispered something into Shea’s ear. Curious, Hajime tried to ask what they were discussing, but they cut him off with questions about the kinds of monsters that inhabited earth, and once they’d finished barraging him with inquiries they both headed off somewhere. All they said was that they’d be back later and that Hajime should head on up first. Reluctantly, he took their advice and returned to his room. He began maintaining his weapons while keeping a lookout for Yue and Shea’s return.

A while later, he saw them coming down the hallway through the open door.

“Okay. Trick or Treat, Hajime.”

“Awawa, this outfit is so embarrassing. T-Trick or Treat.”

“...Seriously?”

Seriously indeed. Yue and Shea both looked rather stunning, in more ways than one. Yue was dressed in a short white mini-skirt with a matching yukata, showing off a liberal amount of leg. The getup was accented by a crimson sash and crimson sandals, which highlighted her white skin. Despite her short skirt, the sleeves of her yukata were quite long, and only her fingers peeked out as she walked forward with her hands held out like a zombie. Judging by the frost crystals she was making hover around her, Yue was probably meant to be a snow woman.

Next to her, Shea was wrapped completely in bandages and moaning in a somewhat convincing mummy impersonation. The wrapping around her tail was a bit loose, and as she was wearing nothing else, her ass was exposed for the world to see. Whoever had wrapped the area around her chest had clearly held some kind of grudge as her breasts were so tightly bound that it looked painful.

Though she was slender, Shea had curves in all the right places, and the outfit made only of bandages served to emphasize those curves. Hajime calmed his beating heart and smiled awkwardly.

“I see there’s two fearsome monsters who’ve come to get candy from me. Unfortunately, I don’t have any to give out. Had I known, I would have gotten some, but...”

Right around the time Hajime had said “unfortunately,” Yue and Shea had happily exchanged glances and blushed slightly. Then, they both broke out into mischievous grins. For some reason, Hajime had felt chills run down his spine just then, and trailed off. Yue licked her lips suggestively and responded to him.

“Well, whether you had treats or not, we were always planning on tricking you. Sexually, that is.”

Hajime’s smile stiffened. He started looking for an escape route, but Shea beat him to the punch. With her body strengthening up to full, she quickly wrestled Hajime into submission. In order to free himself, Hajime began gathering mana to use Lightning Field, but he was a second too late.

“Candy secured.”

“Moron! That’s not candy, that’s— Aaah, stop, stop—”

Shea woke up the next morning after she’d been knocked out by Hajime’s lightning to find him staring off into the distance with dead eyes. Yue was next to him, looking rather satisfied. Hajime’s next words rang out rather clearly in the predawn gloom.

“Halloween is scary...”

The... Not So Worthless Rabbit!?

“Alright, Hajime-san, Yue-san, food’s ready.” The appetizing scent of cooked food reached their nostrils as Shea took the pot of food off the campfire and called Hajime and Yue over. They had made camp a short while back, and Shea had just finished cooking.

“So it looks like we’re having pot-au-feu today.”

“Yeah. It looks delicious.”

Hajime and Yue crawled out of their tent. The stew was filled with delicious-looking vegetables, and there was a freshly baked loaf of bread to go with it. Though it was a simple dish, the taste and texture were outstanding. True, it lacked the polish a five star restaurant’s food might have, but it had the warmth of a home cooked meal to it. True home-style cooking, one might say.

Yesterday’s meal had been Hamburg steak, and the day before deep fried vegetables, and the day before that, meat buns. All cooked to near perfection. When Yue and Hajime heartily dug into their meal, Shea hummed softly as she cleaned up the dishes. Then, she used the leftover water to do the laundry. She washed their clothes with a brush made from the soft bark found in the sea of trees. She’d even made a detergent out of powdered plants. Once she was finished, she wrung the clothes out and hung them by the fire to dry. Clothes too torn to be worn again were sewn into dust cloths, which she then used

to clean the inside of the tent. After that, she repaired the clothes that had only been slightly torn or frayed.

“Shea’s really good at doing housework.” Hajime muttered quietly while he checked up on his weapons. Yue jumped with a start. She wanted to say that she could do it too, but she held her tongue. She had, in fact, tried to help out with the chores before, using her water magic to clean clothes or her wind magic to sweep the tent, but all it had earned her was a scolding from Shea, of all people. Naturally, her cooking was subpar as well. Yue could sew, but not nearly as well as Shea. A sudden shiver ran down her spine.

“Wait... doesn’t that mean Shea’s better than me at housework?”

“Huh? Yue-san, is something wrong?” Unaware of Yue’s plight, Shea simply tilted her head in confusion. Her hands continued sewing the whole time, fixing the battle scars the party’s clothes had suffered. There was no way Yue could compete with that. For a few hours after, Yue could be found inside one corner of their tent, hugging her knees and sobbing softly to herself...

Cat Ears of Terror

One afternoon, Hajime, Shea, and Yue were strolling down the town’s main street, looking to stock up on supplies for their upcoming journey. It was a rare moment of respite in between their constant labyrinth-conquering excursions. The street was filled with the sounds of people haggling over wares, the smells of a hundred different spices mingling together as food stall owners began preparing meals, and the sight of a thousand different stores each with their own unique goods for sale.

One couldn’t help but get excited in such a lively atmosphere. Especially Shea, who hadn’t ever stepped foot outside her small village in the sea of trees until recently. Her rabbit ears were twitching happily as she looked around, the excitement evident on her face. Every few seconds she’d come back to her senses and quickly look around to make sure she hadn’t been separated from Hajime and Yue. After making sure they were still there, she’d then once again start hopping about, examining anything and everything that caught her interest.

“Shea looks just like a little child...” Yue laughed as she watched Shea run around. She then turned to look at Hajime, seeking his opinion. Normally, Hajime would instantly react to Yue’s voice, almost as if on instinct, but for once he was just spacing out, looking straight ahead.

“...Hajime?”

“O-Oh, what is it Yue?” Hajime replied with a start.

Puzzled at his unusual behavior, Yue furrowed her brows. Realizing he must not have heard her, Yue just said, "It's nothing," then kept a closer eye on him after that.

A second later, she noticed Hajime's gaze was fixated on a certain individual. When she followed his gaze to that individual, she felt a wave of jealousy wash over her. But upon closer inspection, she saw that his gaze wasn't fixated on the individual, but rather a certain part of their body.

"I see," she mused to herself. It appeared Hajime had quite a soft spot for "those." Her jealousy vanished somewhat, but she still lamented the fact that she did not possess "those." And she still couldn't forgive another girl for stealing Hajime's attention, even if it was only one part of her that had done so. Also, the words "give up" and "back down" didn't exist in her dictionary, so steeling her resolve, Yue tugged on Hajime's sleeve.

"Hajime, let's split up for a bit. Take care of Shea, okay?"

"Split up? If there's something you want to see or somewhere you want to go, I don't mind taking a detour. We can go together."

"No. I don't want you to know about it yet." Yue pouted and turned away from him. Hajime was shocked; this was the first time she'd ever taken that kind of attitude with him. However, Yue simply gave him one last sidelong glance.

"Don't follow me. I'll get mad at you if you do."

"O-Okay, I won't..." Hajime tried to hide how shaken he was, but failed miserably. Then, without even a backward glance, Yue trotted off into the crowd.

"What on earth is up with her?" Hajime just stood there, dumbfounded, not realizing that he was the cause of her strange attitude.

That evening, Hajime and Shea had returned to the inn and started discussing Yue's odd behavior earlier.

"Yue-san sure is late."

"Yeah. W-Well, I-I'm sure she just wants some alone time."

"Hajime-san, you look pretty flustered..."

"What are you talking about? I'm perfectly fine. Besides, what could possibly have flustered me, anyway? See, nothing's, uh, wrong. Yeah, nothing's wrong at all."

"You're answering your own questions... That sounds like a problem to me." Shea was starting to get annoyed by Hajime's attitude. She'd never seen him like this before, and while it seemed obvious to her that Yue would never leave him, it looked like Hajime didn't trust Yue enough to even be sure of that. She was annoyed that he couldn't believe in Yue the way she believed in him, and her

displeasure spread into her voice.

"I can't believe you, Hajime-san. Yue would never leave you, so why are you acting so worried? Can't you just calm down?"

"Huh? You must be misunderstanding something. I know that she won't leave me. I'd be more willing to believe you if you told me the sky was falling tomorrow than if you said Yue would leave me."

Realizing she'd misjudged what had gotten Hajime so flustered, she followed up with, "Then what is it?" Hajime watched her bunny ears as they tilted to the side in confusion. Finally, he spoke in a trembling voice.

"Look, Yue would normally never leave my side. For her to want to split up, I must have done something pretty bad, something she's really unhappy about."

"O-Okay, and?"

"And that means she's going to assault me tonight." Hajime's answer only served to further confuse Shea. He then started nervously glancing about the room.

"Yue's definitely going to come to my bed tonight. Any time she's unhappy with me, that's what she always does. She's a monster at night, so I'm not even sure I'll be fit to travel tomorrow."

"I see." Shea's reproaching gaze was more intense than ever. It was only natural. Hajime had just told her he was going to have sex with Yue tonight. From Shea's perspective, it just looked like he was praising her sex game. As someone competing for his affection, all the more so because she'd so far been unsuccessful, it only made sense for Shea to be unhappy with him. Even her rabbit ears were twitching in accusation.

Hajime fidgeted nervously and grumbled, "It's only because you haven't seen what she's like in bed that you can say that. Here, let me give you an example. One time, I asked Yue if she was really a virgin."

"Whoa, seriously? That's like the number one thing you should never, ever do."

"Yeah, I know that now. I don't know what came over me, honestly. Maybe I was just too close to breaking under all the constant night raids. Well, it's because she was so good at it in the first place that I began to doubt whether or not she'd really been a virgin."

"Yeah, I bet she got mad."

"'Mad' is an understatement. I honestly thought she'd kill me. Mentally, anyway. I was prepared to end up as Yue's sex slave for life... Those were dark days. Hell, I got down on my knees and begged for forgiveness, even. Can you believe it? Me, begging for forgiveness?"

"Y-You got on your knees? No way..." Shea shuddered in horror. Even if Hajime had called it a night raid, she had assumed the reality

was just that they were having some slightly rough sex. She was going to chide Hajime for exaggerating, but when she heard what he had done, she began to wonder just what kind of crazy antics Yue got up to.

An awkward silence spread throughout the room while Hajime nervously looked around, worried his lover might attack him at any second. Shea just watched on, not knowing what to say. With a soft click, the door to their room opened. Shea and Hajime both looked up at once. Yue was standing in the doorway, a pair of rabbit ears on her head.

"I'm back." Her expression was as deadpan as always. She seemed to not mind the fact that there were rabbit ears growing out of her head. Ignoring Hajime and Shea's shock, she sat down on the bed. Both of them finally returned to their senses, and before Hajime could say anything, Shea was screaming.

"Hwha-Hwhat the heck is thaaaaat!?"

"...What a strange question. They're obviously rabbit ears."

"I get that! But why do you have them, Yue-san? Are you trying to steal my strong points or something!?" Shea pointed accusingly at Yue, screaming as if Yue had just copied her most important trait. Yue simply turned away and responded in a sulky voice.

"It's all Hajime and the rabbit ears' fault."

"Wh-Why does that mean you have to copy my ears? And if they're at fault, why are you wearing them at all?" Shea shook her head. Her bunny ears flopped around as she did so. Hajime looked over at them and Yue mumbled, "I guess in the end fake ones are just..."

Those words finally clued Hajime in on what was going on. Yue had discovered Hajime's secret desire to rub Shea's fluffy bunny ears. And so, in order to compete, Yue had found herself a pair of bunny ears. Most likely at that one store.

"W-Well, I guess I can understand your burning desire to have a pair of your own rabbit ears after seeing how amazing mine are. Fufufu, but let me tell you something. Before the real thing, your faux bunny ears are but a pale imitation!" Shea gazed perhaps a bit too triumphantly down at Yue and continued.

"Yue-san, it was a strategic mistake to try and fight me in my home ground! This is your defeat!" Shea was getting a little full of herself, but it was also obvious at a glance that Yue's ears were fake and not nearly as soft or fluffy as the real thing.

However, Yue had done this for Hajime's sake. He already found her cute beyond belief, but knowing that she was willing to go that far just to please him made it clear which pair of ears he considered more important. There was no comparison between the bunny girl, who was

busy getting full of herself, and the vampire who had done everything she could to grant him his desire. Naturally, Yue didn't falter in the face of Shea's provocations either. In fact, she exceeded all expectations.

"I never thought my rabbit ears would be able to beat yours. This is just the beginning. The real battle starts here!" Yue whipped off the bunny ears and replaced them with something else. That something looked like a pair of fluffy black triangles resting atop her head. Even more amazing, when she poured mana into them they moved like a real pair of ears would.

"Wh-What on... earth?" A jolt of electricity shot through Hajime's spine. An indescribable sense of awe washed over him. But Yue wasn't done yet. As Hajime's trembling hand touched Yue's cat ears, he let out a shocked exclamation. Before their eyes, Yue pulled out another long and fluffy object, and somehow attached it to an area right above her butt. Upon pouring mana into it, it too moved, just like a real tail. Hajime gulped audibly. Yue got on all fours and crawled over to where Hajime was. She looked unbearably cute. When she finally reached Hajime, she said a single word.

"Meow." What Yue had replaced her bunny ears with was the pinnacle of all animal ears, cat ears. She'd even procured a cat tail to match. She arched her back and playfully pawed at Hajime. In this instant, Myue was born.

"Yue, just how far are you going to test my self-control?" Hajime was cradling his head in his hands, desperately trying to hold himself back. His primal instincts were already on the verge of conquering his reason. But even when he was on his last legs, Yue showed him no mercy.

"Meow." She rolled over onto her stomach, like a dog showing submission to her master. Her pleading gaze met Hajime. That was enough to push Hajime over the edge. The light in his eyes was replaced by a feral gleam. But just before what might have been the greatest copulation session in history could begin, Shea bravely interrupted them.



“How sly! Yue-san, you really are a cunning woman! It’s clear that you thought ahead! Still...! Don’t forget that those ears and tail are fake! And my real ears and tail will never lose to fake ones! Look, Hajime-san, these are a real pair of bunny ears. Feel free to touch them all you want!” Betting her very soul, Shea challenged Yue. Her ears and tails twitched excitedly as she leaned into Hajime. But it would seem Yue had predicted even this development. When it came to fighting over Hajime, Yue made sure to prepare for every eventuality.

“You fool. Shea, what makes you think... that my ears are fake at all?”

“What... did you say?”

“I knew you would bring that up, Shea. That’s why I got real cat ears. These are no replica. That’s why I can move them using mana. Mana also helps keep them from rotting.” Yue sat down, then looked up at Shea victoriously. Shivers ran down Hajime and Shea’s spines, but for a different reason this time. Given a cold hard dose of reality, Hajime suddenly started sweating. Shea slowly backed away, her entire body trembling. Yue tilted her head in confusion, as Hajime took a moment to gather his wits before asking a question.

"Y-Yue, where'd you find those?"

“Hm? From a general goods store on the main street.” Hajime and Shea breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed these were commonly sold in the area—

“...But they weren’t the ones selling the real thing.” Hajime and Shea stiffened again. So that meant Yue only got her fake rabbit ears from there. Then where did her very real cat ears and cat tail come from? They both looked back at Yue, who puffed out her chest with pride and answered casually.

“I tore them off myself.” Those twitching cat ears and cat tail. Were they really moving because of the mana Yue poured into them, or because they were still so fresh that...

Suddenly, those cat ears didn't look at all cute to Hajime. She was cowering in a corner, her ears pressed flat against her head.

“She’s a psycho, Yue-san’s a psychopath,” she muttered. Tears were spilling from her eyes and her whole body was shivering.

Yue suddenly shifted her gaze to Shea. Shea jumped with a start as Yue stared at her ears with cold, emotionless eyes.

“Can I... tear those off too?”

“Nooo, Yuesan, you’re insane!!! You monsterrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!!” Shea leaped out of the room with the speed of a fleeing rabbit. Grimacing, Hajime called out to Yue.

“Umm, Yue?”

“Yeah? Sorry, that was a joke. I feel bad for Shea, but I wanted to have some time alone with you... Also, these are fake ears made with real monster fur, that’s all, so you can pet them as much as you want, okay?”

“I-I see. Umm, well, you’re really cute, Yue. But uhh, it’s not because of the cat ears, it’s just because you’re you, you know that right?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Yue smiled warmly. Hajime gently removed the cat ears and cat tail off of Yue and hugged her tight. Yue entrusted herself to Hajime and let the strength flow out of her limbs. Marveling at how lovely she looked, Hajime started stroking her hair.

...He decided not to ask why the ears and tail he’d taken off of Yue had been warm.

Parent-Teacher Conference

“Mom, Dad, please, PLEASE don’t say anything embarrassing.” Those words echoed through an evening-lit corridor of the school.

“Come on, Hajime, what are you so worried about? It’s just a parent-teacher conference. We’re just going to talk about how you’re doing at school and stuff.”

“Seriously, what a worrisome child. Just because your homeroom teacher’s a legal loli doesn’t mean we’re going to mess with her or anything.”

“That’s EXACTLY the problem! Please don’t use words like legal loli in front of my teacher. Seriously, no one else’s parents are like that. Please, I’m begging you, just hold it in, okay?” Hajime looked surprisingly serious. But his mom, Sumire, and dad, Shuu, were just grinning like little children.

“Did you hear that, Sumire? He said no one else’s parents are like this.”

“I did indeed. To think he thought of us as such special people... Dear, I don’t think I’ll be able to let him go when the time comes for him to become independent. Ufufu.”

“That’s not what I meant! Quit interpreting things however you want!” Hajime’s parents just ignored him. Today was the scheduled day for his parent-teacher conference. Because he knew how crazy his parents could be, Hajime was very worried they might mess everything up.

He was suddenly reminded of the disaster that had been his middle school conference. He was snapped out of his musings by the sound of someone’s footsteps coming down the hallway. The teacher who came out to greet them was none other than Aiko Hatayama.

Standing only 140 centimeters tall, baby-faced Aiko resembled a baby squirrel more than a teacher with the way she always ran around doing her best to help, but ultimately making things worse.

The interview started innocuously with Aiko talking about Hajime's grades. Shuu and Sumire nodded exaggeratedly as she went over his test scores and the like. They were clearly just acting the part, so Hajime grew increasingly more concerned.

"Umm, so basically, Nagumo-kun is doing fine academically. Though some of the other teachers and I are concerned about his chronic habit of sleeping during class..." Aiko smiled awkwardly, and Hajime smiled back much the same. Then, reluctantly, she opened her mouth and tried to deliver her next lines as tactfully as possible.

"Also, well, Nagumo-kun's interpersonal relationships are a bit..."

An image of Hajime sitting alone during lunch flitted through Aiko's mind. Though his isolation worried Aiko, Hajime himself seemed to not be bothered by it at all. He had even told Aiko not to worry about him, so she wasn't sure how to address it. However, Shuu dismissed her concerns offhandedly.

"Both me and my wife are aware of his lack of friends, Sensei. And neither of us particularly mind."

"B-But..."

"It's fine, Sensei. Our son may be a little passive, but if the time comes when he needs to step up, he will. My husband and I have discussed this at length already... and if the time ever comes that our son needs to run away, we've already prepared several options for him!"

"U-Umm I'm not sure running away is..." Aiko was amazed at how unconcerned Hajime's parents were with his school situation, and that they were even willing to help him run away if he felt like it.

Sumire suddenly turned serious. Thinking her previous comments must therefore have been a joke, Aiko too grew serious. She was prepared for Hajime's mom to ask her what she as a teacher was doing to rectify the situation, but what Sumire asked was completely unexpected.

"By the way, Hatayama-sensei, are you dating anyone right now?"

"...Come again?" Aiko opened her eyes wide, metaphorical question marks floating above her head. An interrobang was floating above Hajime's head, though.

"I asked if there's a guy you're dating."

"N-No, there isn't, but..."

"Then is there a girl you're dating?"

"Of course not! What on earth are you saying!?" Aiko cried out in alarm. Hajime's expression underwent a rapid transformation.

"I see. I've heard that teaching is quite a demanding profession."

Also, my son says you even give up a lot of your free time to help the students... Frankly speaking, we're worried about your marriage prospects."

"Th-Thanks for your concern! So, why exactly did you bring this up?"

"Well, I was just thinking... why not marry our son?"

"Seriously, what on earth are you saying!?" Aiko exclaimed.

"What the hell! Mom, Dad!" Chaos engulfed the classroom. Shuu and Sumire continued to fluster Aiko even further, while Hajime desperately tried to stop his parents' rampage. However, it only got worse from there.

"Huh? But isn't Hatayama-sensei totally your type?" Shuu asked.

Flustered, Aiko couldn't muster much more than a, "Hawawa."

To which Sumire commented, "Wow, I finally heard someone go 'hawawa' in real life," while nodding in satisfaction.

"U-Umm, that's everything I wanted to discuss..." Aiko slumped tiredly over the desk she was sitting on.

A few seconds later, she got up and tottered unsteadily back toward the teacher's office. Dealing with Shuu and Sumire together drained a great deal of mental stamina. Hajime was in the middle of thinking up an appropriate apology when Aiko suddenly stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned back to them. There was a faint blush spreading on her cheeks.

"N-Nagumo-kun! I'm your teacher, so we can't be in a relationship, okay?" She then turned back and vanished into the teacher's office.

"Mom, Dad, how am I even supposed to face my teacher tomorrow?"

Hajime's parents just gave him a thumbs-up.

"With a smile, right?" They both said that simultaneously. For the first time in his life, Hajime felt like he wanted to kill someone.

A Store Owner Like This... Might Really Exist

The TSUTAYA video store, a bustling chain that boasted a large selection of movies, books, some other merchandise, and the ever present UFO catcher games. Every weekend people flooded the store looking for new releases or old classics. One particular store had an abnormally large amount of visitors. As many as you'd expect to see in a theme park during a parade. TSUTAYA may have been a convenience store, but this was clearly irregular. Furthermore, almost all of the customers were men, and they weren't just standing around the books, reading like usual. They were actually sifting through the merchandise.

By their demeanor, one would be justified in thinking they might be thieves. In fact, it wouldn't have been surprising if one of the store clerks walked up to them and gave them a stern warning. However, the workers at this particular store were used to this behavior, and they carried on like usual.

"Haaa, you know..." One of the part-timers, Hajime Nagumo, looked down at his wristwatch with a sigh. He wasn't counting down the minutes until he was off the clock, but rather waiting for a specific event to occur.

Just then, the door to the staff room began creaking open. Everyone in the store started talking noisily. Their attention was focused entirely on that door. Some of the guys were even panting heavily with perverted expressions on their faces. When the door was finally fully free, the customers...

"The manager's here!"

"S-She's so hot..."

"Apparently she's over twenty. Can you believe it...it's like some kind of miracle."

The crowd was going wild, as if they'd just met their favorite idol. The person who'd come out of the staff room wearing TSUTAYA's trademark uniform and apron was none other than Yue, the manager of this store. She looked like a perfectly crafted doll brought to life. With her small frame, tottering steps, and lustrous golden hair, the word cute didn't do her justice. Despite her lack of expression and breasts, there was an undeniable sexiness to her. She was the intimidating, aloof queen of TSUTAYA.

"Hajime, Shea, have you finished stocking the shelves?"

"Ah, yeah. We finished this morning, Manager."

"Aye aye, ma'am! We are ready for battle!"

Today was the day a famous author's new book went on sale. Hajime, and his fellow part-timer Shea, had spent all morning stocking the exclusive corner with said book. Yue nodded with a satisfied, "Good," and turned to face the members of her fan club that had gathered. Like trained soldiers, they fell into a neat, single-file line in front of the exclusive corner. They had likely trained for this moment. They stood at attention, waiting for Queen Yue's words.

"...Mmm, go forth and buy."

"Yes ma'am!" They did as their queen commanded. It was a bit questionable whether someone in the service industry should have been ordering her customers around like that, but at this point no one said anything about it. The new part-timer, Hajime, muttered something about it under his breath, but that was all. The queen's faithful servants all grabbed copies of the new book and rushed to the register. As the first customer arrived, their queen spoke once more.

“Hm? Just a single copy?” Yue tilted her head. “You’re only buying one thing?” her gaze clearly said. What a cunning move. Nothing was off limits for her, as long as it improved sales.

“O-Of course not. Let me buy one, no two more copies. One to give away, one to keep in my collection, and one to read!”

“I recommend this book too.”

“I’ll buy it! Three copies of that too!”

She really was merciless when it came to business. Yue smiled faintly as the first customer ended up buying six books. Everyone else waiting in line gulped and she tilted her head at them too. “Won’t you buy that many, too?” her gaze seemed to implore. The results were instantaneous.

“Manager! I’ll buy 5! Please just give me your phone—”

“Bastard, you think that’s enough!? Manager, sell me the most expensive thing you have!”

“Hah, fools. It’s not about the price. You’re all buying the newest stuff, but it’s obvious the manager will appreciate you even more for getting stuff that doesn’t sell well! Manager, do you still have that box set of Chupacabra? By the way, would you like to go out for dinner—”

“Manager, can I take a picture of you!?”

In a desperate effort to win her smile, the customers bought more and more items. Hajime stood in front of Yue, protecting her from the mob of jostling customers.

“Please don’t push! Line up in an orderly fashion, please!”

“My apologies, but please refrain from asking the manager for her personal information!”

“Both the box set and the revised edition of Chupacabra are unfortunately sold out!”

“No pictures, please! This store has a no picture policy!”

“Please stop trying to touch the manager, dear customer. If you do that again, I’ll beat the shit out of you!”

“Give it a rest, you bastards! Quit trying to get close to the manager!”

Hajime grew less polite as the requests continued. By the end he was a grinning demon, disposing of rowdy customers. Shea, who was almost as popular as Yue, handled the ones he couldn’t with her toy hammer. Many of the customers bopped by it came away grinning. The remaining clerks worked furiously to handle the waves of customers. Finally, the daily event that started with Yue’s appearance drew to a close. Mixed among the dwindling sea of male customers was a black haired beauty, who muttered some words.

“I wonder if Hajime-kun’s working here today, too?” As Hajime was still busy handling customers, he didn’t even notice her. However, Yue swooped down in a Char mask and intimidated her.

“Our store is now closed. We are looking forward to never having your patronage again. Kindly get out.” And thus, Kaori was evicted from TSUTAYA.

“Haaah, it’s finally over. I feel like I say this every time, but the manager’s ability to attract people is ridiculous. Our sales are on a completely different level from the other TSUTAYAs. Probably for the wrong reasons, though.”

Hajime was taking a break in the staff room after the storm had passed. Everyone took their breaks in turns, so he was the only one free at the moment. However, a few minutes later, Yue came in with some drinks. It seemed they were for him. She passed him a can and Hajime gave her his thanks. It was the little things like this that made her loved and respected not just among the customers, but by the staff as well, which was why Hajime didn’t complain even when he looked down and noticed the label on the can read “Ambrosia.”

“Thanks for the drink, Manager.”

“Mhm... Thank you for protecting me back there. You were cool.”

“Ah, that was nothing... Anyway, it’s dangerous to keep going out like that, so I’d prefer it if you stopped.”

“It’s to increase sales. I won’t stop until we’re the best selling TSUTAYA in the country.” Yue puffed her chest out proudly. Hajime smiled wryly. This was why he could never quit, despite the crazy rush hours and all the extra work he had to put in. The manager was just too lovable.

As Hajime sipped on his Ambrosia, Yue pulled out a light novel and proffered it to him. It looked like she’d pulled it out of her bra, but Hajime was a gentleman, so he made no comment. Her body heat still lingered on the cover, but he pretended not to notice that, too.

“Um, Manager, what is this?”

“Our next big hit. You should read it.”

“You want me to read it? Am I gonna be writing a review on it or something?” He looked quizzically down at the cover, then noticed something strange.

“Hey, Manager... The girl on the cover, the one who looks like the main heroine... looks a lot like you, doesn’t she?”

“Mhm... By the way, the protagonist looks like you, Hajime.”

“Why are you licking your lips like that?”

Shivers ran down Hajime’s spine. He found himself unable to meet Yue’s gaze, and stared down at the book instead. According to the summary it was about how a kind, normal boy got summoned to another world. Thanks to the harsh experiences he faced there, he changed into a completely different person, and went on adventures with a vampire princess that he met along the way. As he flipped through the pages, he noticed the main heroine got naked an awful

lot. She was naked when the protagonist first met her, again after their first big battle together, and then again when she visited him in the bath and pushed him down.

What kind of surreal situation is this!? Hajime was staring at naked pictures of a girl who looked just like Yue, as the real Yue watched him rifle through the pages.

“Read it. In fact, make it your bible. It’s got the greatest heroine you’ll ever see.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.” Hajime started stuttering as Yue leaned in close. The title of the light novel she had given him was—

Arifureta: From Commonplace to World’s Strongest.

Catfight

“Alright, here I come!”

“Whenever you are ready!”

Shea leaped off the ground with enough force to leave a small crater in her wake. She hurtled toward Tio, who was waiting in a defensive stance.

“Hiyaaah!”

“Nnngh. That was a splendid blow! I could feel the weight behind it.”

Shea let out a cute yell as she tackled Tio, who grunted as she took it head-on. She’d strengthened her body enough to handle most attacks, but Shea’s tackle still pushed her back a few centimeters. Similarly, Shea had strengthened herself enough for a decently powerful tackle. Though she hadn’t gone all out, she was still surprised Tio had managed to withstand most of the force. However, Shea wasn’t done yet. She’d been trained thoroughly by Yue and Hajime, so she had a few more tricks up her sleeve. While their bodies were still pressed together, Shea made a fist and stomped forward. She then twisted her legs and hips, transferring all of that energy into her fist, and punched Tio in the flank from point blank range.

Tio gasped in pain, but managed to back away a little. Shea pursued relentlessly, pulled back her arm, and went for an elbow strike. Tio doubled over in pain, and Shea followed up with a palm strike to the jaw. Her head snapped back, and she groaned again. Though this groan sounded a little more like a moan of pleasure. Shea grounded herself firmly and finished with a double palm strike to Tio’s now exposed stomach. Tio was blown back by Shea’s combo finisher. However, she remained standing. Though she left furrows in the ground as she slid back, Tio refused to fall.

“Wh-What a fearsome series of attacks... Those queer movements of yours make defending exceedingly difficult. Each one of your blows

pinpointed a gap in my defenses. Haah... Haaah... Splendid.”

“But you still look fine. And is it just me, or are you getting happier every time I hit you?”

“It’s just you! Now come at me, I shall take each and every one of your blows!”

“I’m kinda getting less motivated the more we do this...” Shea looked down dejectedly. It was obvious her blows weren’t doing any lasting damage, and while she knew Tio’s impressive defense had a lot to do with that, she couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated.

“It looks like I need Drucken to break through your defenses after all, Tio-san... No, I know there has to be a way to do this barehanded!” Shea rushed forward again. This time, her tackle was a lot more straightforward. She ducked at the last second, then used the force of her charge to try and lift Tio off her feet. Unused to such an unorthodox move, Tio couldn’t prevent Shea from tackling her to the ground. Without giving her even a second to recover, Shea attempted to put Tio in an armlock. However, because of the position she was attempting it in, Tio’s arm ended up squished between Shea’s breasts. And, at the same time, Shea’s feet pressed down on Tio’s twin mounds.

“A joint lock? You truly have an interesting array of close-combat skills at your disposal! Still, us dragonmen aren’t so weak that a simple joint lock will stop us!” Tio twisted her hips and bucked hard. Shea’s hold loosened for a split second, but that was all Tio needed to break free. She counterattacked before Shea could get her footing again. Leaping at her from behind, Tio grabbed Shea’s boobs and pinned her down. A cute squeal of surprise slipped from Shea’s mouth.

“Pathetic! Is that all you can do?”

“Fwah... Do not grab me there! And stop squeezing! Hmph, in that case, take this!”

“Hyaaaaahn!? Hey, where do you think you’re pinching!? Hah, payback!”

“Ahihi! It’s slipping... It’s slipping off! I cannot show such a shameful sight to Master! Take that, you shameless vixen!”

“D-Don’t touch me there! Only Hajime-san can touch me thereeeeeeee~”

Tio and Shea continued grappling with each other, neither letting the other stand up. The two of them had decided to have a practice bout while they stopped for a break, but this didn’t look anything like a fight anymore. They were dripping with sweat, their limbs were tangled with each other, and they were panting heavily. Honestly, it looked more like...



“Hajime-dono. I finally think there was value in me, Will Cudeta, surviving that horrible trip up the mountain.”

“I see. I’m glad you realized so soon.”

The two girls doggedly continued fighting, even after being stripped half-naked. Will cried tears of happiness as he watched. The sight had truly moved him. Hajime agreed wholeheartedly, but he couldn’t let those feelings show on his face. After all...

“.....”

He could feel Yue’s gaze drilling into him from behind. When he turned around, he saw her sitting as still as a doll, staring intently at him with cold eyes.

“That truly is a sight for sore eyes, isn’t it, Hajime-dono?”

“Could you just shut up for a bit?” Hajime started plotting different ways he could beat these memories out of Will.

Shea’s Cooking Lesson

A slender finger traced its way down a ripe red fruit. The egg-shaped fruit suddenly split into round slices. It was then assailed by a sharp wind and minced into fine pieces. Unlike most fruit, its center was hollow. The relentless wind pounded the pieces of fruit until they were nothing more than fine powder. A beautiful girl, Yue, nodded in satisfaction as she looked at the powdered fruit. She scooped up the powder and stealthily walked over to a simmering pot. With a faint smile, she made to dump the powder into the pot, but before she could—

“What do you think you’re doing, Yue-san?”

“Huh!?” Someone grabbed her arm. Trembling, she looked up at the owner of the hand that had grabbed her.

“S-Shea...”

“That’s right, it’s Shea. And I’m getting very tired of you trying to add the poison you call ‘originality’ to our food, Yue-san.” Normally she was the helpless, worthless rabbit, but at present Shea’s face was a mask of anger. Yue whimpered softly, looking anywhere but at Shea, and started explaining herself.

“C-Calling it poison is a bit much. I’m sure this will make the dish taste even better—”

“How many times have you said that now? And how many times have your ideas ruined my food? There’s nothing more dangerous than a beginner experimenting with recipes!”

As she’d been royalty, Yue had no idea how to cook. Because of that, she’d started taking lessons from Shea, who was skilled in all sorts of housework. However, her attempts at adding a twist to Shea’s

dishes had all ended in failure. At first, Shea had put up with Yue's antics. She'd guessed Yue just wanted to impress Hajime with something she'd made and let it slide. However, Yue's constant attempts to make something new and her complete disregard for the basics had turned Shea from a worthless rabbit into a wrathful rabbit. That was why Shea's ears twitched angrily as she looked at Yue.

"But I'm sure it'll work this time. I'm pretty sure Hajime will love this taste."

"'Pretty sure' doesn't cut it! Besides, it's obvious that won't do anything to improve the dish's taste! That's devilclaw fruit! One pinch of it is enough to ruin the taste of most dishes! Do you understand now!?"

"But Hajime's the one who's going to eat it. And he likes spicy food... He's even had demon meat before, so he'll probably like something more stimulating."

"I just said probablys and pretty sures don't cut it when it comes to cooking!" Shea forcibly wrenched Yue's hand open and tried to throw Yue's powdered devilclaw fruit into one of her spice bags. However, Yue resisted with all her might. Shea started pinching Yue's cheeks with her free hand, trying to get Yue to let go, and yet the overpowered rabbit's cheat-level strength was too much to fight against, and eventually she let go. However, Shea had put too much force into her hand.

"Nuwaaah!? The spice really lives up to its name! My eyes, my nose—" Shea rolled on the ground as she clawed at her face. Yue looked down nervously as she watched Shea writhe in pain. Normally, devilclaw fruit needed extensive preparation before it could be used in anything, so just touching it was enough to burn people's skin. However, Yue's automatic regeneration ability had allowed her to handle it raw without much discomfort, which was why she hadn't realized just how potent a fruit it was. All she'd read was that properly prepared devilclaw fruit was the most exquisite spicy seasoning that could be added to a dish.

"S-Shea? Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okaaaaaaaay! Water! Wash away the residue with water, pleaseeeee!"

"Okay." Yue cast a spell and a massive torrent of water appeared out of nowhere. Any normal person would have been crushed to death by the force of what was a veritable waterfall, but Shea knelt above the oncoming deluge, arms spread wide. She looked like a devout pilgrim seeking salvation. The water hit her with the force of a cannonball. Ten seconds passed, then twenty. Finally, the water stopped. A crater had formed where it had slammed into the ground, and its center was Shea, still kneeling in the same pose as before. She

wasn't moving.

"Shea? Hello? Earth to Shea-san?" Yue timidly called out to her. Shea's drenched rabbit ears twitched a little, then flopped straight up, shaking all the water off. Shea slowly got to her feet. Then, still dripping, she briskly walked up to Yue and firmly grabbed her by the shoulders. Yue shrank back from the intensity of her gaze. After all, Shea's face was so close to Yue that their noses were practically touching.

"Y-u-e-s-a-n!"

"S-Shea, calm down. Your face is—"

"S-h-u-t-u-p!"

"O-Okay." Yue's expression stiffened as her facial muscles cramped up. Shea's face was a complete mess. Her eyes were red and swollen, and drool, tears, water, and snot dripped from every orifice. Her lips were swollen, and flecks of red dotted her pale skin. To top it all off, her voice was raspy. All of that just gave her rage an even sharper edge. Her expression was positively demonic, as her swollen eyes promised death. It seemed that her anger had long since boiled over and shot up to the stratosphere.

Cold sweat poured down Yue's back and she gulped audibly. Shea stared Yue in the eyes and rasped out a few words.

"Respect your food."

Yue nodded.

"The basics... of cooking... are important."

More nodding.

Shea pushed down on Yue's shoulders so hard that she was kneeling. Yue continued nodding as if her life depended on it, but there was no way the demonic rabbit was going to let Yue off with just that. Yue cast her gaze about, looking for someone to save her, and spotted her beloved lover, watching the proceedings from a few meters away. She begged to be rescued, but... Hajime averted his gaze. She looked at him in shock. Never had she expected that Hajime would abandon her in a time of need, but she didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Don't look away," Shea rasped out. The wrathful rabbit's punishment was inescapable. Yue's shoulders drooped, and she spent the next few hours listening to Shea's lecture. Seeing Yue in tears for the first time actually turned Hajime on a little, but that was a secret he would take to the grave.

A Wise Woman's Dream

Is that... Kaori? And is that... Nagumo-kun with her? Shizuku hazily caught sight of her best friend and her secret crush. For some reason,

Hajime looked dim and somehow transparent to her, as if he were obscured by a fog. However, she knew it was Hajime because he was the only person Kaori would run so wholeheartedly toward. Kaori stopped in front of Hajime and started talking. Shizuku was standing too far away to make out what they were saying, but after a few seconds, Kaori leaped into Hajime's arms and started weeping tears of joy. Whatever it was they had been talking about, it had clearly made Kaori happy.

Good for you, Kaori... Shizuku was glad to see her best friend find happiness. She decided it wouldn't be very nice of her to ruin her best friend's moment, and was about to turn to leave when...

Hm? Who's that? And they finally got to enjoy their reunion, too... Is that a friend of Nagumo-kun's?

Two unfamiliar girls walked up to Hajime. Like him, they were covered by this fog and their outlines were hazy, but she could tell one of them was a small girl with beautiful golden-blond hair. There was something almost bewitching about her as she walked up to Hajime and pulled on his collar from behind, separating him from Kaori. Then, to add insult to injury, she drew Hajime into her bosom.

Wh-Whaaaaat? What's going on!?! What the heck is this!?! Amazed by this soap opera-esque development, Shizuku hurriedly looked over at her best friend.

Hiiii!?! She summoned a demon behind her! A demon with a grinning theater mask appeared behind Kaori like a stand. It tapped its sword menacingly on its shoulder as Kaori walked up to the blond girl.

Run! I don't know who you are, but run if you value your life! Shizuku tried to call out to the girl, but for some reason her voice wouldn't come out. Realizing it was up to her, Shizuku ran forward. She needed to stop her best friend before she became a murderer. However, before she managed to reach them—

What the!?! Something just came out of the little girl too! What is that!?! Some kind of golden dragon!?! A golden dragon erupted from the golden-blond haired girl's back, coiling itself around her. Dark clouds billowed around it, lightning occasionally flickering from inside them. It looked just as ominous as Kaori's demon.

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

“Hisssssssssssssssss!”

The dragon let out a thunderous roar, while the demon raised its sword above its head and hissed threateningly. For some reason, the two girls were posing in front of each other.

Just what the heck is going on here!?! Shizuku, the spectator, was far more confused at what was happening than the parties involved. An overwhelming pressure, so powerful it was tangible, pressed down on Shizuku. She could feel her sanity slowly being eroded away. If this

were an RPG, Shizuku's mental hit points would already have been in the red. She was almost out of sanity points. The final blow to her psyche was when the golden dragon charged at the demon.

The dragon roared with the force of all the world's storms. Lightning bolts rained from the sky in a never-ending barrage, but the demon cut down every bolt with its precise swordsmanship. Then, with a slash sharp enough to rend the universe in two, the demon sliced the dragon in half.

However, a rain of lightning fell on the dragon, fusing it back together. It then fired a beam of lightning from its mouth. The force of its attack was so great the very atmosphere was carbonized, but before the light of destruction could reach the demon, it deflected it with its sword. It flew into the sky, drilling a hole in the dark clouds above. The earth shattered, the skies wept, and the atmosphere burned.

It was as if the final judgment had come. Shizuku trembled like a newborn fawn in a tiny corner of the crumbling world. Any desire to stop them was gone. She just wanted to run away. She turned to flee, but her decision had come a moment too late. The demon's slash and the dragon's breath collided, and were deflected straight toward Shizuku.



Wait, no... Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah! Oh, it was just a dream!?” The light of despair filled Shizuku’s vision, and she awoke with a bloodcurdling scream. It really was just a dream. She wiped sweat off her chin as she recalled what a terrifying dream it had been. Then, she sighed with relief.

“Thank god it was only a dream...” She looked over at her best friend. Surprisingly, her scream hadn’t woken Kaori.

“Haha, there’s no way Kaori’d be like that, right?” For some reason, chills ran down her spine, and she shivered. Was it really just a dream, or perhaps a premonition...

Valentine’s Day in a Parallel World

In a certain small town, the atmosphere was currently very lively. Hajime, Yue, and Shea had stopped for a short rest, and were curious about the sweet, somewhat excited mood that filled the town.

“Hey, is there a festival or something today?”

“Hm? You don’t know? Today’s Fris Day. Come on, you’ve got to know what it is. You even have two lovely ladies following you around.”

The person Hajime had asked was a bald, macho flower salesman. It appeared today was a celebration most people knew about. When he pressed for details, Hajime learned that Fris Day was a day for people to confess to their crushes. The reason it was called Fris Day was because of the abundance of white fris flowers everywhere. It was said that if someone confessed with a fris flower and the other person accepted, the couple would be together forever. As Hajime looked around, he noticed there were a lot of people selling white flowers, and plenty of young guys and girls were gathering around them.

“I see. While it’s not exactly the same, it’s basically like Valentine’s...”

“Hm? Valentine’s?”

“What’s that?”

Yue and Shea spoke up. Reminiscing about his home world, Hajime explained Valentine’s Day to the two of them.

Valentine’s Day, a time where warriors go forth to do battle. The hot guy sorcerers usually dominate that day. For Hajime, it had been a day he’d spent running away last year. Had he been caught, he knew what hell awaited him in school.

“Hm... So Hajime, there was a girl who confessed to you that day. What was her name and what did she look like? Go on, tell me.”

“Eeeeh you have another lover, Hajime-san? How many dozens of women came before me, I wonder?”

“Can you two at least watch your mouths in public?” Hajime backed away as the seductive vampire princess and the crying worthless rabbit bore down on him. Phrases like, “How many dozens of women came before me,” would definitely get misunderstood.

“Oh my, what a wonderful battlefield of love.”

“It looks like that guy over there’s a real playboy.”

“He just toys with girls’ feelings and throws them away when he’s done with them! What a heartless brute!”

“Don’t meet his gaze! You’ll get pregnant!”

The onlookers all started voicing their opinions. His mouth twitching, Hajime hurriedly tried to flee to somewhere more private. He picked Yue and Shea up, then carried them to the closest inn.

That evening, the three of them had split up to get their shopping done. Once they’d gotten everything they came for, they rendezvoused at the inn to get dinner. Hajime was sitting at a table by the window, his chin resting in his hands. Yue sat next to him. Shea had insisted on cooking dinner for him today, and was currently borrowing the inn’s kitchen.

“Sorry for the wait~ Here’s Shea’s ultimate special~”

“Ultimate special? What on earth did you make... Wait, this is...”

“That’s right, it’s a meat and potato stew. Well, I don’t know what potatoes are supposed to taste like, so it’s just my imitation of it.”

Hajime had told Shea all about the food he used to eat in Japan. Considering how many of the fruits and vegetables in this world resembled fruits and vegetables from his own, he’d thought it might be possible to recreate the same dishes. After a lot of trial and error, Shea had managed to replicate the stew decently enough with her stellar cooking skills. Hajime tentatively lifted a spoonful to his mouth.

“Wow!” Hajime exclaimed. It wasn’t exactly the same, but it was about as close as it could get.

“But why’d you decide to make this again today?”

“Ehehe... Because today’s Fris Day. You said people give gifts for that Valentine’s Day or whatever, right? I thought the best present I could give you was food from your hometown, Hajime-san.”

“I see. Well, thanks. This is really good.”

Shea’s rabbit ears flopped around happily. Then, Yue gently tugged on Hajime’s sleeve, so he turned to face her, and she pointed out the window. He looked outside quizzically, spotting speckles of white falling from the night sky.

“Is that... snow?”

“Mhm... Snow doesn’t fall on the northern continent, but you said it snowed in your hometown around Valentine’s Day, so I made it

snow with magic.”

Both Yue and Shea had worked hard to give Hajime a Valentine's/Fris Day present. They both knew how badly Hajime wanted to go back, and this was the closest thing to home they could have given him. Hajime smiled gently at the two girls. Such a tender smile was rare for him.

“These are the best presents I could ever ask for. Thank you.”

“Mhm...”

“You're welcome!”

While people outside frolicked in the snow that was neither cold nor wet, the three adventurers spent Fris Day with each other.

A Certain Peaceful Hero Party

This is a story that occurred a short while after the students were summoned to Tortus. After some time had passed, the students had finally begun to get used to the fantastical situation they'd been thrust into and returned to some semblance of a normal daily life.

Kouki and his party were especially unused to all the praise and respect they were being showered with. As they were the group that would lead the vanguard in the war to come, the residents of Tortus had practically been worshiping them. However, they'd grown accustomed to it, and even made friends with some of this world's inhabitants.

Happy with the results of the day's training, Kouki wiped the sweat off his brow and started heading back to his room. Ryutarou, who he was rooming with, had already returned ahead of him. Seeing as there was still time before the sun set, Kouki was thinking of inviting him to hang out somewhere. When he got back to his room, he noticed the door was slightly ajar. As he put his hand on the doorknob, he heard a voice coming from inside.

“Hoooh... Haaah... Haaah...”

Kouki peeked through the gap in the door and saw his best friend posing in front of the mirror. He shifted fluidly from pose to pose, as if he were going through a martial arts form. At times his large muscles relaxed, while at other points they tensed. Kouki could tell that Ryutarou was dead serious about whatever it was he was doing.

I guess he's checking the condition of his body or something? Or maybe it's some kind of exercise?

Sadly, Kouki couldn't muster the courage to find out what Ryutarou was actually doing. In fact, he couldn't even walk inside his room. The reason being because Ryutarou was doing all of this buck naked. Just then, Kouki's gaze met Ryutarou's. Or rather, the reflection of Ryutarou's gaze in the mirror. They both froze in place. It

was as if time had stopped. Expression stiff, Kouki muttered something.

“Oh yeah, I just remembered I forgot something at the practice grounds. Bye.” Kouki wanted to escape from this awkward predicament as fast as possible.

“Wait, Kouki! Don’t get the wrong idea. I was just practicing my forms!”

“While... n-naked?”

“W-Well, I just... Oh, who cares! Colonel Stuart was naked in the movie too!”

I see. So Ryutarou was just acting out scenes from Die Hard 2. Kouki nodded in understanding, giving his best friend a look full of pity all the while.

“Don’t worry; I didn’t see anything, Ryutarou... Anyway, I should go check up on Shizuku.” Kouki turned on his heel and high-tailed it out of there.

“Ah, dammit, Kouki! Stop right there, you bastaaaaaard!” Ryutarou’s embarrassed shout echoed through the hallway. For days afterward, he could feel his classmates shooting him pitying looks. Needless to say, Ryutarou was traumatized from that day onward.

That night, Kouki was relaxing in his bedroom when the events of that afternoon suddenly came back to him. Back when they’d been kids, they’d often tried to imitate the heroes they’d seen in movies. It had been pretty embarrassing whenever Shizuku had caught them doing it. By the end of elementary school, though, Kouki had grown out of it.

I guess coming to a world of swords and magic brought back a little bit of his childish side.

When he thought about it like that, Ryutarou’s actions seemed kind of cute. He was tempted to tell Shizuku and Kaori about it. Ryutarou himself was still sulking and had gone out to do some extra training. The poor guys he’d roped into joining him were suffering his misplaced wrath right about now. Kouki glanced over at the holy sword leaning against his bed. It really was a magnificent piece of craftsmanship. He could feel something inside him stirring as he stared at it. Before he knew it, he had his sword in his hand and was standing in front of the mirror. He put his left hand on his hip and raised his sword up high, striking a daunting pose.

“Hmm, this feels a bit plain.” Kouki swapped to a different pose. He was getting steadily more into it. After cycling through a few more poses, he remembered something from movie posters and swung his sword in a mighty arc.

“I’ll protect everyone! I swear it on my pride as a hero!”

That was perfect. Kouki sighed contentedly and smiled to himself. Just then, someone barged into the room.

“Kouki-kun, are you here!? We’ve got a big problem! Ryutarou-kun’s started fighting with the other boys and—” Kaori stopped mid-sentence, her mouth hanging open. Kouki was still in the middle of posing in front of his mirror. It felt like time stopped for the second time that day.

Sweat began dripping from Kouki’s forehead. He gave what he thought was a confident smile, his body still frozen in the same pose. With each second that passed, however, his smile grew stiffer until Kaori finally broke the silence.

“G-Guys do this kind of stuff all the time, right? It’s no big deal or anything, right?” Kaori smiled awkwardly and backed out of the room, closing the door behind her. Kouki heard her scream, “Shizukuchaaaaaaaaaaaaaan” as her footsteps faded into the distance. A few minutes later, Kouki finally recovered enough to stop posing.

“Wait Kaoriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! It was just a misunderstandiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!” His embarrassed shout echoed through the hallway. For days afterward, he could feel his classmates shooting him pitying looks. Needless to say, Kouki was traumatized from that day onward.

Sometime earlier, around when Kouki was discovering the marvels of Ryutarou’s naked body, Kaori was chatting to one of the palace’s maids. They were just talking about usual girl things. It had all started when one of the maids had asked Kaori what kind of drinks one of the male students in her class liked. From there, the discussion had devolved into the topic of love.

One of the maids had been bold enough to say, “I bet if I said ‘I’m here to serve you *personally*, Master,’ I could make any of the boys fall for me.”

The topic had gotten a bit too stimulating for the still innocent Kaori. Once the maids started talking about the gory details of seducing men, Kaori had fled from the conversation.

“I never knew the palace maids were so lewd...” As the blush faded from Kaori’s cheeks, she noticed something. In her hurry to get away from the maids, she hadn’t been paying attention to where she was going. As a result, she’d wandered into the storage closet used by the palace servants.

On top of one of the shelves she spotted a pile of maid uniforms next to a sign that said “spare.” Five minutes later, the shelf was one maid uniform short. Kaori dashed back to her room as fast as her legs would take her and held the stolen maid uniform up to her chest. She examined herself in the mirror for a few seconds, blushed, then changed into the uniform.

This was her first time wearing something like this. Had any of the boys in her class spotted her in it, they would have gotten nosebleeds instantly. She did a little twirl, and her skirt fluttered up. Kaori examined herself in the mirror and muttered something.

“I-It looks pretty good.” A certain boy’s face popped into her mind. After a moment’s hesitation, she said something to the boy in her imagination.

“L-Let me service you, Master~”

She leaned forward, emphasizing her bust, and winked. Her actions were a little stiff, but it was still an impressive display. When she realized what she’d done, Kaori buried her face in her hands and hunched over. Finally, she got over herself and stood back up. She still couldn’t believe she’d actually said that. As she grabbed the hem of her skirt and turned around, she found herself face to face with Shizuku, who was sitting in her bed, a book hanging limply from her hands.

“Sh-Sh-Sh-Shizuku-chan!? How long have you been here!?”

“Since you got back?”

Kaori had been so preoccupied that she hadn’t even noticed Shizuku was in the room. For her part, Shizuku had been too shocked by the chain of events to say anything. First her best friend barged into their room, then she changed into a maid outfit, then she started doing sexy poses.

“Umm, so, Shizuku-chan. This isn’t what you think. So, like, basically, the maids were all acting really lewd, and then—”

“Don’t worry, Kaori. It’s okay. I understand.”

“Y-You do? Thank goodness. Hey, Shizuku-chan, why are you trying to sneak out of the room? Where do you think you’re going?”

Shizuku surreptitiously put one hand on the doorknob. She smiled as sincerely as she could to Kaori, but Kaori wasn’t buying it. Kaori reached out to stop Shizuku, but before she could, Shizuku bolted out of the door.

“Nagumo-kuuuuun! Kaori’s, Kaori’s—”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo! Stoooooooooooooooooooooop! Shizuku-chan I hate youuuuuuuuuuuuu!” Her embarrassed shout echoed through the hallway. For days afterward, she could feel her classmates shooting her pitying looks. From that day onward, the story of Shizuku running around while Kaori chased her in a maid uniform became a legend among the palace residents.

Midnight Tag

The moon’s sinister silver light shone down on the world. A thick layer of clouds sparkled, forming complex patterns, creating an

ethereal world of seas, mountains and cathedrals. Such fantastic shapes wouldn't be possible with the clouds on earth. A single black shape glided through the illusory scenery. It was Tio. Her black scales scintillated in the moonlight as she slipped past towering cloud castles.

"You really enjoy this, don't you, Master?" Tio flapped her elegant wings and turned to speak to Hajime, who was riding on her back.

"Well, yeah. It's starting to become kind of a hobby. If it bothers you, you can tell me to stop asking anytime."

"Oh no, it's no bother at all. In fact, I am glad you enjoy our nighttime jaunts through the skies. Though, you *are* the first person to ever ride upon my back. In a way, you could say you took my 'first time.'"

"Could you shut your mouth? And never open it again?"

"More insults!? Perfect!" Tio started panting, ruining her majestic image. Hajime grimaced and turned his attention to the brilliant night sky. Thanks to the shimmering clouds, it wasn't too dark.

I'm in a parallel world, riding on the back of a dragon. This was the kind of thing every child dreamed of experiencing. And thanks to Tio, Hajime had been able to experience it for real. He'd enjoyed it so much that it had started becoming a hobby of his. On nights where the sky was overcast and there was no danger of anyone on the ground spotting Tio, he would soar through the skies on her transformed back.

Tio, too, had come to enjoy their nighttime excursions. It was the only time she got to see Hajime, who normally only insulted her, meekly come up to her and ask, "Is it okay... if I ride you tonight?"

She also felt a twinge of pride that he would choose to ask her. After all, if all he wanted to do was fly through the sky, he could easily craft an artifact that would let him. However, he went out of his way to specifically ask her. And while they didn't talk much during their flights, Tio could tell Hajime enjoyed them immensely.

It made her feel warm and fuzzy inside to know that she was making him happy. To Tio, these trips were an irreplaceable treasure.

"What do you say, Master? Shall we fly through those cloud arches? You won't see such formations often."

"Hm? Sure, that sounds good. You know, now that I get a good look at them, some of them aren't arches at all. They're rings. I should have expected as much from a fantasy world. Tio, since we're already up here, why not show me just how fast you can fly?"

"Fufufu. If that is what you wish, Master. I suppose I can show off if you insist. Hang on tight; you wouldn't want to be blown off!"

"You got it!" Hajime was unusually spirited. Spurred on by his excited response, Tio roared and flapped her wings. They accelerated

toward the natural obstacle course the clouds had made for them.

She sped through the sky like a bullet, a black streak through the midnight blue sky. She made sure Hajime was still hanging on and soared through the first arch. Then, she skillfully maneuvered through the next series of rings, using the air resistance to help her turn.

“Haha, you’re amazing, Tio! I should have known a legendary dragon wouldn’t have any trouble with a few rings!”

“You honor me with your praise, Master. If you are in a generous mood, I would like to take my reward in the form of kisses and abuse.”

“I’ll abuse you all you want, but no kisses.”

“Very well. How about kissing me while slapping my arse? Nothing would make me happier.”

“Pervert. These night dates I can accept, but I will not allow you to do something so disgusting with Hajime.”

“Please, could you—” Halfway through her sentence, Tio realized it wasn’t Hajime she was talking to. Yue was flying next to Tio, her arms crossed. Her glare was so intense that most people would have fainted just from being on its receiving end.

“Yo, Yue. What’s up?”

“It looked like you two were having a lot of fun, so I wanted to join in.” There was one part of what Yue said that struck Tio as odd.

“How could you discern what we looked like? We were flying rather high in the sky, not to mention the fact that the clouds were obscuring us. Did you use some form of magic?”

“Hm? I don’t need to use magic to know what Hajime’s feeling.”

“I-I see.”

Hajime was taken aback. It was a bit of a shock that she could tell what he was feeling all the time, no matter where he was. Especially since she claimed to not need magic to do it.

“Your love is very stalk— Ahem, deep,” Tio muttered quietly. Yue turned her intense stare onto Hajime. It felt as if she were looking through his very soul.

“It looked like you two were really enjoying yourselves,” she repeated herself. Tio could see the flames of jealousy burning deep within her eyes.

“W-We should probably head back soon. Let’s do this again sometime, Master.” Pressured by Yue’s glare, Tio suggested they return. Oddly enough, Hajime didn’t respond right away. Normally he spoiled Yue, so it was rare to see him not acquiescing to her wishes. He put his hand on his chin and lapsed into thought. Then, in a flash of inspiration, he grinned at Yue and said something.

“Hey, Tio. If I’m your master, then that means you have to listen to my orders.”

“Fwah!? O-Of course. If there is an order you wish to give me, I will gladly accept.” This would be Hajime’s first formal order for Tio. She was both confused and somewhat excited by the prospect. Hajime’s grin grew wider, and he gave Tio her order.

“Alright Tio, I order you to leave that vampire in the dust!”

“Ah! I see, Master. I must say, I didn’t expect you to have such a mischievous side to you. Still, that’s what makes you interesting! Very well, I shall do as you command!” Tio let out a playful howl and accelerated even more. She easily outstripped Yue. While she was still recovering from the shock of what had just happened, Hajime called out to her.

“Hey, vampire princess! Catch us if you can! If you manage to get us, I’ll give you anything you want!”

“Are you sure you want to make that bet? You know you have no chance of winning, right?”

“This dragon of mine might be a hopeless pervert, but she’s pretty fast! You sure you can win that easily?”

“Hmph, as if I would lose to a pervert. You’ll regret choosing the dragon over me!”

“M-My dear Master, could you please not insult me in the middle of a conversation with someone else? Haaah... Haaah... I might get so excited that I accidentally cancel my transformation.”

Now that he was finally able to enjoy his time in this other world, Hajime wanted to savor it to the fullest. A game of tag through the night sky with Yue was the perfect way to do that. And though her words were harsh, Yue was grinning, too. Panting excitedly, Tio blazed through the sky. Yue used her gravity magic to close in on them. The moment she saw her chance, she would rush in for the kill. “Aaah, I’m begging you, Master! Please whip my arse into shape! Drive me like you would a horse! I am certain I could go even faster that way. If you punish me, I’ll have enough strength to sprint through that wall of clouds!”

Hajime ignored the dragon’s perverted words and focused on the race. He didn’t want her ruining this perfect night. Meanwhile, on the ground, Shea had been left all alone.

“The rain won’t stop... and no one’s back yet... Don’t tell me they forgot about me? Don’t they know that rabbits die from loneliness? Hurry up and come baaaaack~ Hic...” Shea huddled inside her tent and stared up at the cloudy sky.

Don’t Call Me A Goddess!

“Whoa, look at that! It’s the Fertility Goddess!”

“To think she would visit our lowly town...”

“Her kindness knows no bounds. I heard she stood up to an army of sixty thousand monsters just to save the town of Ur.”

“Not only is she improving all of our lives, she’s putting her own on the line to protect us. Though she’s a bit different from what I expected. I thought she would be more... adult-like and beautiful.”

“That’s what makes her such an amazing goddess. Even though she’s short, she’s still working so hard for our sake. This may be rude, but I honestly think she’s kind of cute.”

“I know what you mean. She may be a goddess, but honestly, she reminds me of a baby squirrel. I just want to cuddle her.”

“Oh, you too? I know it’s rude to think this of a goddess, which is why I didn’t say it before... but she’s really cute. I want to take her home and take care of her.”

“Personally, I want to give her a big hug. I’d sit her on my lap and admire her all day long.”

“I just want to look after her.”

The villagers were talking so loudly that it was hard to believe they were even trying to keep Aiko from hearing them. Aiko flushed bright red and tried her best not to say anything. Some time had passed after the incident at Ur, and Aiko had heard the same things from every village they’d gone through on their way back to the capital. Thanks to Hajime’s little scheme, everyone thought it was Aiko the Fertility Goddess who’d saved the town of Ur.

The stories had spread like wildfire, and her name was already known throughout the kingdom. She’d accelerated her fame by making sure she improved the agricultural conditions of every single village she stopped at on the way back as well. Though it was her own actions that had made her look so endearing, and made the villagers all think she was adorable.

Despite her petite appearance, Aiko was 25 years old. She was an independent, working, contributing member of society. She didn’t like being treated like a goddess, nor did she like being treated like a child. She glared angrily at the villagers, but it had the opposite effect of what she’d intended.

“Ah, the goddess looked at us! All hail the Fertility Goddess! Come on everyone, cheer with me!”

“All hail our goddess! All hail the Fertility Goddess!”

Now they were cheering her on in the streets. Tears of embarrassment welled up in Aiko’s eyes.

“E-Everyone, my name is Aiko! Aiko Hatayama! Please stop calling me a goddess!” Aiko had tried to stop people from calling her a goddess wherever she’d gone, but to no avail.

“H-How humble... To think she would allow us poor villagers to call her by her name...”

“Her kindness truly knows no bounds... I have never been so moved in my life.”

“All hail our Fertility Goddess!”

“All hail our kind and merciful Fertility Goddess!”

Trembling with emotion, the villagers continued to cheer on Aiko. Her words had only served to deepen their faith in her.

“Grrrrrr, what do I have to do to get them to use my actual name? Are they trying to kill me with embarrassment? Are the villagers all actually hitmen out to end my life?” Aiko was so embarrassed that she couldn’t even think straight, which was why she was seriously entertaining the possibility that all the villagers were hitmen.

David and the rest of Aiko’s guards tried to cheer her up, but they couldn’t hide their own happiness at how popular their goddess had become. Their obviously insincere attempts to make her feel better only made Aiko feel more depressed.

“Umm, Ai-chansensei. We’re the hero’s comrades, and Ehit’s warriors, so we’ll always stand out no matter where we go. You shouldn’t worry so much about the attention.”

“Sonobe-san... I don’t mind the attention. Well, I do a little, but there’s nothing we can do about that. It’s just hard acting like a grown adult when everyone around you is calling you a goddess!”

Without a moment’s delay, David and the other knights started telling Aiko how she wasn’t really that old, and that she was too cute to be an adult. Aiko ignored them.

“Now now, Ai-chansensei. Your fame as the Fertility Goddess was spreading even before Ur. All that did was speed it up a little.” Atsushi and the others nodded in agreement.

“I suppose you’re right, but still...” Aiko just didn’t want to accept it. The students all watched her with a mixture of pity and amusement. She decided to flee back to their inn, trying to escape from the villagers’ gazes, but before she made it inside, she heard them start talking about someone else.

“By the way, what kind of person is the Goddess’ Sword? I’ve heard that he has white hair and wears an eyepatch...”

“Well, the only people that strong aside from the knights are Ehit’s warriors, but I heard he wasn’t one of them.”

“Are we even sure he has white hair and wears an eyepatch?”

It seemed it wasn’t only Aiko’s fame that had started to spread, but Hajime’s too. The Goddess’ Sword was just as well known as the Fertility Goddess herself now. Aiko’s ears perked up when she heard Hajime’s title mentioned. She looked around the street while surreptitiously listening in on their conversation. Yuka and the other students strained their ears as well. Now that the topic had been brought up, the villagers were eager to share all the rumors they’d

heard about Hajime.

“That much is certain. After all, there aren’t many white-haired guys with eyepatches running around.”

“I heard he shot down all the flying monsters with a spear of light, and destroyed the rest with a meteor shower.”

“He sounds amazing. But if he’s the Goddess’ Sword, how come he isn’t guarding her right now? That group of Ehit’s warriors is.”

He certainly was amazing back there, Aiko and the students thought to themselves. Even David and the other knights begrudgingly had to admit that Hajime had fought splendidly. Though, that didn’t mean they had to like everything else he’d done.

The villagers all puzzled over the question of why Hajime wasn’t guarding Aiko like a Goddess’ Sword should. One of them spoke up, offering a possible explanation.

“Come to think of it, I heard something from a merchant who was staying in the same Water Sprite Inn as the Goddess. Apparently her sword had a lot of women in his party and they were trying to fight with the Goddess for his love. Maybe he felt it would be awkward if he stayed?”

Aiko coughed in surprise, quickly averting her gaze.

“Wait, what!? The Goddess and her sword are lovers!?” Before long, the story had grown completely out of hand. According to the villagers, Aiko and Hajime were now lovers, and he’d had to leave her side because another woman had gotten between them.

“E-Excuse me, everyone. Please don’t spread baseless rumors! I am a teacher, and he’s my student! We have no such illicit relationship!”

Aiko’s knights approached the villagers with a dark look in their eyes, but before they could do anything, she spoke up. Unfortunately, the desperation in her voice made it seem like she was just trying to hide the truth and what had just been a rumor became cemented as fact in the villagers’ minds.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t want to say this because it might be rude, but I heard from a lot of people that after the fight the goddess and her sword, well, you know.”

“Y-Yeah, I heard that too. That they shared a passionate kiss in the town square in front of everyone, I mean.

Aiko blushed so deeply that her face looked like a giant tomato. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sounds came out. The villagers started discussing the kiss, and Aiko began to panic. She turned to look at Yuka and tried to explain herself.

“S-S-S-Sonobe-san, it’s not what you think! He was just giving me CPR. There was nothing romantic about it! I swear, I’m an upright and honest teacher!”

“H-Huh!? Why are you trying to explain it to me? B-Besides,

whatever you might have done has nothing to do with me!”

Yuka couldn't understand why Aiko had suddenly turned to her. But even though she tried to protest, Aiko was beyond reason. Yuka couldn't stop her from repeating, “I swear, it's all just a misunderstanding.”

“What's this strange feeling welling up...?”

“You don't have to say it, Atsushi... I know exactly how you feel.”

The girls near them were getting flustered over a guy who wasn't even here. Atsushi and the other guys watched on with dead eyes, while Taeko and Nana just snickered. Even when he wasn't present, Hajime was sure to cause a ruckus.

Yue's Magic Lessons

“Hm? You want to know the trick to using magic?” Yue tilted her head in confusion. It was just past noon, and Shea had asked her what the trick was to using magic. Shea had absolutely no affinity for any of the elements. It was so bad that her affinity was around the same level as Hajime's.

In fact, the two of them had often spent evenings lamenting to each other how they wished they could use magic. However, despite these shortcomings, Shea had one thing no other beastman had. She possessed mana, and the ability to manipulate it directly. Because of that, she still held dreams of decimating hordes of enemies with magic. As nothing else had worked, Yue was her last hope. If even the strongest magician in history didn't have a solution for her, then Shea really was doomed.

“Yes please. Maybe if I learn your secrets, I'll be able to use a few spells in battle even though I don't have any affinity for magic. At least, that's what I'm hoping.”

“Hmm... Okay, I'll teach you. It never hurts to have more skilled party members.”

“Wow, really!? Thank you so much, Yue-san! I knew I could count on you!” Shea's bunny ears flopped happily. She was over the moon already; even though there was no guarantee Yue could solve her problem, either.

“Oh, is Yue holding a magic lesson? This sounds rather interesting. Would it be alright if I joined in, Yue?”

“Yeah, I don't mind. It's kind of moving knowing a dragon wants to be taught by me.” Though Tio already had amazing affinity with most of the elements, she too was interested in Yue's lessons. It wasn't every day that she had the chance to learn from the greatest magician of the age, after all.

For her part, Yue had grown up listening to stories of the wise

dragonman tribes. It was a mark of pride to her that one such dragonman would be interested in learning from her.

Hajime watched the three girls discuss the finer points of spellcasting with a forlorn look in his eyes.

Sharp-sighted as always, Tio noticed Hajime's gaze and tilted her head quizzically. "Master, what's wrong? Would you like to join in as well?"

"Nah, I'm good." Hajime seemed unusually dispirited. Sensing an opportunity to tease him, Shea grinned and opened her mouth.

"Fufufu. What's wrong, Hajime-san? Could it be that you already received private lessons from Yue-san, but you still can't use magic? Is that why you're too scared to try again?"

"Nah, that's not it."

"Then why won't you join us?"

"Really, I'm good. In fact, you two should probably get out while you still have time. For your own sake, I mean."

Yue didn't take kindly to that. She pouted and turned to face Hajime.

"You're so mean, Hajime. Are you saying I'm useless?"

"Not exactly. It's just, everyone's suited to certain tasks and not suited to others..."

"Huh, but Hajime-san, wouldn't Yue-san be the most suited person to teach us magic?"

"Precisely. I have lived a long time, but never have I seen anyone with as much talent as Yue. I consider myself a skilled magician, but even I would relish an opportunity to learn from her."

Hajime raised his hands in surrender.

"Just remember I warned you."

They pondered his words for a few seconds, but the lure of being taught by Yue reeled them back in, so they put it out of their minds.

Yue pulled out a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles—no one knew where she got them from—and began her lecture. She articulated with her hands as she explained the theory behind the original spells she'd created. About ten minutes into the lecture, Shea and Tio began to have an inkling of what Hajime had tried to warn them about.

"So if you just go *whoosh* with the magic here, it'll go all zap. Then, you just have to squeeze it like *Gyuu* and it's done! Simple, right?" Yue smiled at her dumbfounded pupils. Nothing about that had been simple at all.

"I see. Or rather, I don't."

"Yeah, I have no idea what you just said."

"Huh!?" Yue's eyes went wide with surprise. Tio and Shea timidly tried to ask for a more elaborate explanation.

"What exactly is the zap part supposed to mean?"

“What do you mean ‘*Gyuu*’?”

“Like I said, it’s when your mana goes *Gyuu*. Then there’s that little fluffy feeling, and you just have to get to that floaty state where —”

Shea couldn’t take it anymore.

“Like I said, that doesn’t make any sense! All these weird sounds and stuff don’t actually mean anything! I’m begging you, please just use normal people words!”

Yue tilted her head in confusion. *How did that explanation not make sense? I tried to make it as simple as possible.*

Realizing this was what made sense to Yue, Tio changed track. She asked Yue if she could give a more theoretical explanation. Yue nodded, and did as she was asked.

“So, the *Gyuu* state is basically when you accelerate your mana from 0 to 2.25. From there, you multiply it by a further 2.25 to 2.27 depending on the element and type of spell you’re attempting to cast. However, unless you restrict it with a resistance ratio of 3.95, you won’t be able to give the spell form. Fortunately, once you’ve cast it, the degree of variability is automatically accounted for, so you don’t have to—”

“I meant a theoretical explanation people can actually understand!” This time it was Tio’s turn to explode. Shea’s rabbit ears were pressed flat against her head, and she was staring off into the distance with dead eyes. Yue grumbled to herself, confused as to why the two of them couldn’t get it.

“That’s why I tried to give you a simple explanation first... Why don’t you two understand?”

“Gah!?” Shea and Tio clutched their chests and collapsed. It seemed from Yue’s tone that she thought the two of them were idiots. In truth though, Yue was thinking no such thing. She was honestly confused as to why an explanation that seemed simple to her didn’t make sense to them. It was as obvious as the fact that the sun rose in the east, and that leaves changed color in fall.

Shea had already known she knew nothing about magic, so the hit wasn’t that bad for her, but for Tio it was devastating. She had considered herself if not a master, at least a veteran magician. However, the pride and knowledge she’d built up for centuries had been shattered by a single sentence from Yue.

She crawled along the floor muttering, “A-Am I truly an idiot? Did I honestly believe I was a skilled magician when I don’t even understand the basics?”

Shea tottered over to Yue and threw herself at Yue’s feet. “Please, please make it stop. You’ve already crushed Tio-san’s pride.”

“Don’t worry, all you need is practice. Just follow the steps I said,

and you'll be able to do it, too. Come on, stand up and give it a try."

Shea and Tio staggered to their feet. Even if they told Yue to stop, she wouldn't. She'd gotten into the role of a teacher and was having too much fun to quit.

"Okay, repeat after me. *Gyuu! Paruparu! Soooi!*"

"Aren't those sounds different from last time!?"

Yue made a kamen rider pose and tried to lead Shea and Tio through a spell. Naturally, the two of them couldn't understand her at all. However, that wasn't going to stop Yue.

"Come on, go '*Gyuu!* Come on! What's taking you guys so long!"

"*G-Gyuu!*"

"*G-Gyuu...*"

"Okay, now '*roonroon!*'"

"*R-Roonroon.*"

"Once more, with feeling! '*Soooi!*'"

"*S-Sooooooi!*"

Their voices carried a long way through the empty plains. A few passing adventurers gave the trio odd looks. Shea and Tio were in tears by now.

"I warned you." Back when he'd been in the abyss, Hajime had hungered for more power, which naturally meant he'd asked Yue to teach him magic. She'd taken him through the same hellish routine Shea and Tio were suffering now.

Geniuses were considered geniuses precisely because they operated on a different level from normal people. Hajime ignored Shea and Tio's pleas for help and lost himself in thought.

Rabbitmen Clothing is a Dangerous Weapon

Hajime and his party had stopped in a small town for the night. Despite the town's relatively small size, there was a surprisingly large amount of people there. The girls all looked around happily.

"So this is the town famous for its textiles. Everyone's clothes look really well made."

"Mhmm. The weavers here are very skilled."

Yue's crimson eyes darted from person to person. She was impressed by the quality of the cloth she saw. Back in the abyss she had sewed clothes for herself and Hajime. At first, it had taken a lot of effort to make even the simplest of garments, but she'd improved a lot since then. Sewing had become something of a hobby for her. Hence why she was so excited by all the rolls of colorful yarn that she saw, and the skilled weavers who knitted with them.

Shea and Kaori were quite excited as well. Shea was a master of all household chores, so of course clothes and sewing excited her,

while Kaori was a high school girl with an interest in fashion. While the others were fascinated by the town, the town was fascinated by Tio. Her exquisitely crafted dress was a traditional garment for dragonmen, but it was rare to see something like it outside her village.

“Daddy, look at all the different clothes! I’ve never seen those kinds before!”

“Really...? Come to think of it, what do dragons usually wear anyway?”

Young though she may be, Myu was still a girl. She was just as interested in clothes as the others. Hajime looked up to the little girl riding on his shoulder. She tilted her head and thought for a moment.

“Nothing, usually!”

“You guys are nudists!?”

Hajime noticed the cold stares from the girls and quickly cleared his throat. In truth, dragons usually wore some form of swimsuit, as they spent most of their lives in the water. When they were on land, they put on a robe or something over that, but that was about it.

Hajime could see the other girls were about to mention that they would strip for him if that was what he wanted. He really didn’t want to have that conversation, so he turned to Myu for salvation.

“Is there anything you want, Myu? Since we’re already here, I can buy you some new clothes if you want.”

“I can buy anything!? Ummmm, ummm...”

Eyes sparkling, Myu looked for something to get. Hajime really did spoil her. Yue and the others stared pointedly at him. Hajime smiled, and agreed to buy them whatever they wanted too. After a few seconds of searching, Myu found what she wanted. She stared long and hard at a certain article of clothing. Specifically, what Yue was wearing.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Myu?”

Myu pointed at Yue and said, “I want what Yue-oneechan is wearing! I want to wear something like that too!”

“You want my clothes? But Myu, there’s so many other cuter outfits here.”

Yue’s dress had frills everywhere and was plenty cute. But she’d designed it for travel and combat, so it wasn’t the most elegant piece. However, Myu had seemingly taken a liking to it.

“But you’re the coolest, Yue-oneechan! You look really cool when you’re fighting with Daddy and using magic and stuff! Even though I’m daddy’s daughter, I’m really weak. But maybe if I wear your dress I’ll get stronger too!”

“Myu, you’re so pure it hurts.”

Myu’s statement had been so cute that it gave Yue a nosebleed. Yue plucked Myu off of Hajime’s shoulder and squished her soft

cheeks. Myu squealed in protest but Yue ignored her.

“M-Myu-chan, don’t you think I look cool, too? I can take out anyone with a single swing of my hammer! Enemies cower before me!”

“Myu-chan, I’m really good at holding enemies back! Here, let me show you my Binding Blades of Light!”

“In that case, allow me to show you the power of my breath. You’ve yet to see just how amazing I am, correct? My glorious breath will leave you astounded.”

Everyone tried to impress the party’s little princess. Myu squirmed her way out of Yue’s grip and turned around.

“You’re not... cool, Shea-oneechan. You’re, umm... wild?”

Shea clutched her chest and fell to the ground with a moan. There was nothing more heartbreaking than being told you’re not cool by a little girl.

“And Kaori-oneechan’s... weak...”

Kaori clutched her chest and fell to the ground with a moan. There was nothing more heartbreaking than being told you’re a pathetic weakling by a little girl.

“And Tio-oneechan... y-you’re okay!”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean!?” Tio retorted and fell to the ground. There was nothing more heartbreaking than being pitied by a little girl.

Three girls lay on the ground in the middle of the town’s main street. They looked up simultaneously when they heard footsteps approaching them. Yue was standing over them, grinning from ear to ear. Rarely did she ever show such expressiveness.

Shea and the others slowly got to their feet, a murderous glint in their eyes. They had always known she would be the final boss.

Thinking it was her fault that her role models were fighting, Myu hurriedly stepped between them.

“U-Umm, you all have really cool clothes too, Shea-oneechan, Kaori-oneechan, Tio-oneechan! So umm... I know! Let’s all trade clothes! That way we’ll all be able to wear everyone’s clothes! It’ll be fun!”

The four women looked at each other and smiled awkwardly. Their petty rivalry had caused a little girl to worry about them. Hajime smiled, proud of his daughter’s attempts to mediate. Then he grinned wickedly and turned to Yue.

“How about it, why not give Myu’s proposal a go? You can all draw lots at random and wear whoever’s outfit you pull. We’re in a town of tailors, so they’ll be able to make them in your sizes easily.”

Myu looked up at the girls expectantly. There was no refusing her. Yue and the others quickly agreed to Myu’s idea. With a great deal of

money and coercion, Hajime convinced a nearby tailor to make the girls' outfits right away. Once he was finished, the girls went into the fitting rooms to change. As the store they were in was a large one, there were plenty of other customers around. Hajime stood in front of the changing rooms, waiting to see who came out first.

"Daddy, look, look! I'm Yue-oneechan!"

It turned out to be Myu. She was wearing Yue's clothes. A frilly shirt, a black skirt, a white coat, and ankle boots. Hajime had to admit she looked cute. She flapped her arms, which were too short for the coat, and struck the same pose Yue did when she was casting magic.

"Oh, it looks pretty good on you Myu. You look more like an adult now."

Myu grinned and blushed.

"Myu, don't open the door while other people are still changing."

Yue stepped out of the same fitting room. She'd gone in with Myu to help her change. Hajime muttered a soft, "Wow..." as he saw Yue's outfit. He wasn't the only one, either. The other customers and even the tailor who ran the store were impressed. Yue was wearing Tio's kimono. The dragonman's kimono was an eclectic mixture of western and Japanese styles. Yue looked like a refined, elegant lady in it.

"Th-This is my first time wearing such an outfit... I must say it's rather embarrassing."

"Your clothes are so frilly, Kaori-san! There's so much cloth it's hard to move around in them."

Next out were Tio and Shea. Tio was wearing Myu's one piece. It was white, and adorned with multiple ribbons and frills. Tio blushed as she looked down at herself.

It's rare to see that perverted dragon ever embarrassed about anything. Still, she looks cute in that. Hajime said as much to Tio, which caused her to blush even more furiously and hide behind a clothing rack. The male customers all got nosebleeds watching her.

Meanwhile, Shea was in Kaori's priestess' clothes. She found the overabundance of cloth uncomfortable, but the outfit accented her figure nicely. Hajime had to admit she looked beautiful in it. The only person left was Kaori. However, even after a few minutes she didn't come out.

"Hm? She's still not coming out."

"Hmm. Wait here, I'll drag her out."

Yue smiled mischievously and barged into Kaori's changing room. There were a few loud thumps, and Kaori screamed shrilly, "I can't do it! I can't wear Shea's clothes! They're practically underwear!"

"Don't worry about it," was Yue's reply.

Then, after a moment of silence, the door to Kaori's changing room flew open and Kaori was thrown out into the wild.

“Ugh, this is soooo embarrassing. Hajime-kun, please don’t stare at me too much...”

Kaori tried to cover herself up with her hands as she blushed to the tips of her ears. Rabbitmen clothing was quite revealing, and Kaori’s slender legs and ample cleavage were on full display. Hajime normally didn’t notice the outfit since Shea didn’t seem to care about how much of her skin she exposed. However, Kaori’s embarrassment emphasized just how revealing it was. Quite a few of the customers fainted from blood loss after seeing how sexy she looked. The store became a sea of blood as Yue and the others swapped outfits again and again.

Shea’s outfit looked smoking hot on anyone who wore it, and before long the customers were drowning in their own nosebleeds. Hajime made a mental note to slaughter all of the men who’d gotten nosebleeds looking at Myu in Shea’s outfit later. Once the outfit swapping was over, Hajime gave his closing remarks.

“Yeah, I guess Shea’s clothes really are sexy.”

Traditional clothing or not, it was rather revealing. And so, Hajime reconfirmed what he’d always known, but had forgotten.

Fantasy World Mini-Skirt Santas

“Come to think of it, it’s almost Christmas.”

Hajime and the others looked up from their food at Kaori. They had stopped in a small town for lunch. Yue and the others looked confused, but Hajime nodded and said, “Oh yeah, you’re right... At least, going by earth time it would be.”

“Fufu, the Christmas party we had last year at school was pretty fun. You only stayed for a little bit, but at least we took pictures and exchanged presents still...”

Kaori smiled as she reminisced about the past. Hajime, too, smiled faintly as he thought back to his days in Japan. Yue’s eyebrows twitched as she watched the two of them. Shea grumbled to herself while Tio smiled knowingly. Myu simply watched them with a blank expression on her face.

“Yeah, I definitely remember you and Yaegashi blocking the door and begging me to take a picture with you guys. Thanks to that, the whole class hated me on Christmas. After that, even though it was supposed to be a random present exchange, you only gave your presents to me. So the class hated me even more. Then, you jacked the present I’d brought for the party and invited me to an after party at your house in front of everyone. At which point I’m pretty sure the rest of the class was ready to murder me... Yeah, that Christmas is definitely nostalgic. Also terrifying.”

“Are you sure we’re remembering the same party!?”

Kaori couldn’t believe her ears. But all of the events Hajime spoke of had really happened. He honestly feared for his life that night. Yue tugged on Hajime’s sleeve and asked him what Christmas was. He explained that it was an end-of-year festival and left out the Christian roots. After all, what was important about Christmas was that a jolly man in a strange costume went around giving presents to all the good kids that night. That, and all the Christmas cake people ate. Kaori puffed out her cheeks and complained about Hajime’s half-assed explanation.

“That’s not all, Hajime-kun. If you’re going to explain, explain properly. L-Like how it’s a holiday for lovers to deepen their bonds.”

Kaori blushed at her own words. Yue and the others suddenly looked very interested.

“Hajime, did you do anything with Kaori that night? You know, the kinds of things lovers might do?”

“I already mentioned everything I did at that party. Back then, I just thought of Kaori as a troublemaker. There’s no way I would have ended up spending Christmas alone with her. If I had... I probably wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

“Th-That’s mean, Hajime-kun!”

It hurt to have Hajime denounce her as a troublemaker so casually. Worse, Hajime didn’t seem moved at all by her pleading gaze.

“That’s my line, you airheaded troublemaker. It would have been even worse if you’d only invited me to that after party of yours, but as it was that was still a huge problem for me. Especially with the way you were dressed. I thought for sure you were out to kill me.”

“O-Out to kill you? Why would I do that?”

Wondering what Hajime meant, Kaori tearfully searched through her memories. *The way I was dressed? What was I even wearing that day? Oh yeah...*

“U-Umm... if I recall correctly I was dressed in a santa costume...”

Indeed, Kaori had been dressed in a santa outfit the day of the party. That in itself wouldn’t have been a problem. Santa costumes were pretty common during Christmas. Kaori tilted her head, wondering what had been wrong with her outfit. Hajime sighed. The worst part about all of this was that he knew now that Kaori hadn’t actually meant anything malicious by it.

“Back when you asked me how you looked, I just said it suited you. That was because I didn’t want the other students to kill me. However, I’ll be honest with you now. That costume of yours was really erotic.”

“E-Erotic!? You really thought that!?”

“Uh, yeah? Your skirt was so short I thought I’d be able to see your panties. There was a heart-shaped pattern cut out of the shirt so I could easily see your cleavage, *and* it was sleeveless. Plus, with how tightly it fit, I could see all of your curves. Do you even know how many guys Yaegashi had to put down because they couldn’t control themselves any longer?”

Kaori buried her face in her hands. She was red all the way to the tips of her ears. She’d worn that outfit because her friends (mostly Suzu) had told her that she’d be able to make any man fall for her if she put it on. It was only her delusions of making Hajime fall for her that had given her the courage to wear such an embarrassing costume. When she thought back on it now, she realized just how bold she’d been. But she didn’t have too long to sit there squirming, because Shea and the others chose that moment to butt in.

“You really are crafty, Kaori-san. Really crafty. To think you tried to use revealing clothes to make Hajime-san fall for you. You’re a natural born erorist!”

I don’t want to hear that from you. You wear even less than that normally!

“Hmm, I understand now. You wore a revealing outfit on purpose so you could get off to everyone calling you a pervert. You are even more of a deviant than I am.”

I am NOT! Also, there’s no way I would ever be more perverted than you!

“You’re so red, Kaori-oneechan. You look cute!”

You’re cuter than I am, Myu. In fact, you’re my only source of relief in this cruel world.

Yue stood up silently, her eyes burning with fighting spirit.

“.....”

Then, she grabbed Kaori by the collar and dragged her out of the restaurant.

“Y-Yue? Where are you taking me? Actually wait, let me go! I can walk myself!”

“We’re going to buy clothes. Then to fight, seduction with seduction. Santa costume against santa costume. I’ll prove that you’re not the only one that can be an erotic santa.”

“I never claimed I was! Also I’m not that much of a pervert! Stop lumping me together with you!”

“Heh.”

“Hey, what was that laugh for!? Tell me, Yue!”

But Yue ignored her. Realizing what was about to happen, Shea and Tio followed the pair out. They took Myu with them, and left Hajime to pay the bill.

That evening, five people in santa outfits stood in front of Hajime.

With the exception of Myu, all of their outfits were erotic. Mini-skirts and sleeveless shirts abounded.

“Hm. What do you think, Hajime?”

Yue twirled around, her skirt rising dangerously high as she did so. Shea and Tio struck alluring poses, emphasizing their massive breasts.

“Well, they do look good on you guys, but... if I saw you on the streets, I’d think you were all perverts.”

“Huh!?”

Yue, Shea, and Tio stiffened. They all turned to Kaori, who was trying her best to cover herself up with her hands. Kaori averted her gaze.

“You planned this, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t! In fact, I’m the one who told you guys not to do this! But you kept insisting! And now I’m stuck wearing this too... It’s so embarrassing!”

“Doesn’t matter, this is your fault. Now pay for making Hajime sigh at us!”

Yue called forth a fierce tempest. Kaori, who had no real defense to speak of, could only watch as her skirt was flipped all the way up.

“Stoop! He’ll be able to see my pantieees! Ugh, fine if this is how you want to play... Divine Shackles!”

Kaori pushed her skirt back down and sent chains of light at Yue’s skirt.

“Hmph. Not good enough. Tio Barrier!”

“What are you doing? Aaah, they’re twisting around me!? I’ve never experienced bondage like this!”

Yue pulled Tio in front of her and used the dragonman as a shield. Kaori’s chains mercilessly tied Tio up, emphasizing her breasts even more. She instantly started panting heavily. Yue countered with another burst of wind. This too, was aimed at Kaori’s skirt.

“Like I’ll let you! Shea Barrier!”

“Whaaat!? Hey, Kaori-san!?”

Kaori’s chains wrapped around Shea and dragged into the line of fire. Shea’s skirt flipped up past her stomach, revealing her plump thighs.

“Kaori-san! This is far too embarrassing! Please let me go!”

“Don’t worry, the outfit you’re usually wearing is just as embarrassing!”

“Hey, what the fuck did you just say, you little bitch!? Are you insulting the traditional dress of the Haulia!?”

Shea ripped off her chains and charged at Kaori. But Kaori fended her off with a barrage of Binding Blades of Light.

Freed from her shackles, Tio squared off against Yue.

“If you’re going to strip people, then it’s only fair for you to be stripped in return!”

Tio grabbed Kaori’s unpowered chains and looked for an opportunity to flip Yue’s skirt. In an inn inside a small town in Tortus, four santas tried their best to strip each other.

“Daddy, this coat is all fluffy!”

Meanwhile, Myu enjoyed prancing around in her santa outfit.

“Myu, please grow up into a better woman than those four...”

Hajime patted Myu’s head while he watched the four girls try to strip each other through increasingly violent means.

The Stands

It was a peaceful, sunny day in the floating city of Erisen. Lately, however, the city had been anything *but* peaceful. Today, like usual, Hajime was sitting on the pier practicing his transmutation. One of the causes of the city’s troubles walked up to him.

“Hajime-kun, can I sit next to you?”

“That you, Kaori? You know you don’t have to ask permission for each little thing, right?”

Kaori blushed, and sat down close to him. Extremely close to him. Close enough that Hajime had a hard time concentrating on his transmuting. She was also in her swimsuit.

Hajime turned to Kaori, planning on telling her to respect his personal space, when she was blown off the pier. She flew through the sky, flipping over herself multiple times, and fell into the water with a loud splash. Yue walked up and took the spot Kaori had vacated. Though she was as expressionless as usual, Hajime could tell she was satisfied. She sat down next to Hajime and stretched her bare legs.

“Yue, did you just...”

“What are you making, Hajime?”

Looks like she’s at it again today too... Yue pretended she hadn’t just blown Kaori into the water and looked curiously at Hajime’s work. But before she could do much more, Kaori pulled herself back onto the pier. She was dripping wet, and her bangs covered her face so that she looked like a certain horror movie antagonist.

“Yue, do you have anything to say for yourself? I’ll give you one chance to explain.”

“Huh? Who are you?” A vein pulsed in Kaori’s forehead. Invisible sparks flew as their gazes met.

“Fufufu, you’re a funny one, Yue. I can’t believe you’ve forgotten about the person you just threw into the sea. Is your memory really that bad?”

“Oh. I remember now, you’re Kaori. You’re so gloomy that I

always forget who you are. You should try and do something about that gloominess of yours.”

“I think you’re the one that needs to fix that leaky brain of yours.”

Kaori and Yue both started laughing. Yue got to her feet and the two glared at each other. As always, strange creatures appeared behind both of the girls. A massive golden thunder dragon appeared behind Yue while a demon in a terrifying mask appeared behind Kaori. The dragon let out a ferocious roar while a blizzard whipped up around the demon as he tapped his sword against his shoulder. This was the reason Erisen hadn’t been peaceful in recent days. The strange apparitions that Yue and Kaori summoned were the cause of it all. Hajime knew what came next. Kaori would yell at Yue for being a bully and attack her. Yue would reply that it was Kaori’s fault for trying to be crafty and fight back. Their little catfights had become quite the spectacle, and many of Erisen’s citizens came to watch.

“Look, they’re at it again today, too. Just what are those things behind them? They look like a dragon and a demon, but how do they appear and disappear like that?”

As Hajime watched them duel with a troubled smile, Shea walked up to him.

“Why do you look so unhappy? By the way, you shouldn’t try to understand those apparitions. Just accept them as part of life.”

“What are you saying, Hajime-san? Those things only pop up whenever they’re fighting over you. In other words, they’re proof of their love!”

“They better not be. What kind of symbol of love is a dragon or a demon?”

Shea folded her ears over her head and ignored Hajime’s words.

“I love you just as much as they do, so how come I can’t summon a spirit of love? I want one of those weird apparition thingies, too!”

That’s what she’s unhappy about? Hajime sighed as he watched Shea scrunch up her face and try to summon something.

“I think I already know, but what are you doing?”

“Trying to summon an apparition, obviously!”

I’m not sure that’s something you can bring out by force... However, force was the only thing Shea could think of to use. *What happened to these things being a symbol of love?*

Sky blue mana swirled around Shea and her hair began to flutter in the breeze. She let out an earth-shattering yell that sent nearby residents scurrying to safety. The sea around the pier grew choppy, and for a moment Hajime honestly thought she might summon something. But in the end, nothing happened.

“Well, figures that wouldn’t work.”

“Awww... What a shame.”

Shea sank to her knees and her rabbit ears drooped in disappointment.

“Is my love not strong enough? No way...” Shea muttered to herself. Hajime smiled and patted her fluffy rabbit ears. He continued playing with them until he was satisfied.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d be able to summon one of those, anyway.”

“I don’t believe it. Do you doubt my love too, Hajime-san?”

Shea’s mood had started to improve when Hajime began patting her, but it took a nosedive when he said that. But Hajime shook his head.

“I don’t really... mean that in a bad way. I think those things are created from negative emotions. They’re illusions born from the negative auras those two have.”

“Haaah... Really?”

It wasn’t a very scientific explanation, but it seemed that Hajime had at least given it some thought. Shea stared blankly at Hajime, wondering where he was trying to go with this. Hajime pulled Shea close and ruffled her ears some more.

“Basically, you’re not the kind of person that would have one of those. Besides, even if you don’t have a weird illusion behind you, you have two perfectly good bunny ears on top of you. You should be proud of those. At the very least, they’re good enough for me.”

“Ugh... I wish I had more experience. I never know what to say during times like these. If only I was more girly...”

Shea blushed and fidgeted absently for a few seconds before deciding to lean into Hajime. Her ears perked up, and she pulled Hajime’s hand closer.

“Fufu. You don’t let any opportunity slip by, do you, Shea?”

“Yeah. She got us there. Though it was a splendid surprise attack... I can’t believe you would try and surpass your master.”

“Huh!?” Shea’s ears shot straight up. She turned around to see both Yue and Kaori smiling at her.

“Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Roooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

Kaori’s demon and Yue’s dragon growled ominously at her.

Shea bolted. Naturally, Yue and Kaori gave chase. For some reason, the residents of Erisen cheered whenever they heard another explosion.

“I’m so glad this city is peaceful.”

Hajime’s words were drowned out by the sound of rumbling thunder.

A Falcon’s Daughter is Still a Falcon

There was a loud bang, and several flashes of crimson light shot through the sky. Hajime's railgun-accelerated bullets shot straight through the wolf-shaped monsters. Each bullet blew up a monster's head.

"Aww. Thanks to your artifacts, the only time we ever get to fight is when we're in a labyrinth, Hajime-san."

"That's just how it is. Master's artifacts are so powerful that at long range, they make magic look like a joke."

Shea and Tio chatted while they watched Hajime mow down an entire pack of wolves. Kaori smiled awkwardly and said, "I'm not sure you could even call those artifacts... They're more like weapons out of a sci-fi."

Yue tilted her head in confusion and muttered, "Sci-fi?"

"It's short for science fiction. Basically stories that are based off of science but aren't very realistic. There's guns in our world, but they're not like the railguns Hajime-kun's made. You'd only see something like that in books or movies."

"Well, I had to use the cheat known as magic to make them work so I'd say they're more 'fantasy' than sci-fi."

Hajime walked up to the girls while reloading Donner. He'd already wiped out the monsters. Myu was sitting on his shoulders. She seemed to be enjoying herself quite a bit. She'd just had front row seats to a monster massacre, and it appeared she'd quite liked what she'd seen.

"Daddy, I want to try using that thing that goes bang, too!"

Yep, Myu was really enjoying herself.

Kaori, who tended to be sensible in all things not involving Hajime, furrowed her brows.

"Hajime-kun, you're a bad influence on Myu-chan. She's saying some really ominous things with a smile on her face now. I'm worried what kind of woman she'll grow up into."

"Well, you've got a point, but... this world's pretty dangerous."

"Yeah. You're being naive, Kaori. Here it's kill or be killed. Even if your enemy doesn't look like they're going to kill you, kill them anyway. In fact, if your eyes meet, kill them. It's best to have at least one kill a day. You can only get what you want by wading through a sea of blood and climbing over a mountain of corpses. That's the kind of place this world is."

"You're way too bloodthirsty, Yue! We're not in Fist of the North Star! It's true that this world is more dangerous than ours, but it's not *that* violent!"

Yue ignored Kaori and turned to Myu. In an imposing voice, she asked, "Do you desire strength?"

"Wait, Yue, that line's supposed—" Before Hajime could finish,

Myu interrupted. "I do! I want to be able to make bad people explode like Daddy!"

Yue nodded solemnly.

"Very well. Then Hajime shall grant you strength."

She implored Hajime with her gaze to let Myu shoot Donner. Hajime's expression stiffened. Not only would letting her shoot Donner be dangerous, it really wasn't good to teach a little girl how to kill. Hajime hesitated, showing a rare display of common sense.

Myu hopped off of Hajime's shoulders, ran over to Yue, and turned back to Hajime. She looked up at him with pleading eyes, and his common sense vanished.

"Alright, you can shoot."

"Don't you think you gave in a little fast there!?"

Hajime pulled some ore out of his Treasure Trove and began transmuting. Red sparks flew from his hands as he worked. All of the guns he possessed had too much recoil for Myu. So he made a toy gun that she could fire safely. He crafted this gun with even more care than he'd crafted Donner. He named his newly forged toy gun Donna. It wasn't strong enough to kill anything, but it was still powerful enough to have some fun with. The exquisite craftsmanship of the toy revolver showed just how skilled a Synergist he really was. Myu's eyes began to sparkle as she looked at it. It was as if she'd received the birthday present she'd always wanted. Though, not many four-year-old girls wanted a revolver as a present.

"Alright Myu, I'm gonna teach you how to shoot. But first you have to promise me you won't pull the trigger without my permission."

"I promise!"

Her cheerful reply was at odds with the murderous weapon she held in her hand. "Haah, I'm not sure this is a good idea..." Kaori's muttered worries were swept away by the wind.

And so, Hajime began teaching Myu how to shoot. He set up a target ten meters away, and showed her the Weaver Stance.

"Alright Myu, this may be a weaker gun, but it still has a lot of recoil. If it hurts too much to hold, just let go of the gun."

Myu nodded. Then, without hesitation, she fired. There was a soft pop, and Donna bucked in her hands. She didn't even scratch the target. Myu pouted, and Hajime consoled her with a smile.

"Don't worry, it's not that easy to hit a target. You'll get better with practice."

He pulled out another set of practice bullets.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san, I want to try shooting too, if possible..."

It looked like watching Myu shoot had piqued Shea's interest.

"You have Drucken's bombardment mode, don't you?"

“I know, but that’s different. I want to try the precision shooting you do.”

“I said this to Myu earlier, but it’s not easy to hit a target.”

Hajime was sure Shea didn’t really want to practice precision shooting. If anything, he suspected she just wanted to experience the feeling of shooting a gun. And it looked like Yue, Tio, and Kaori were all interested as well, judging by the expectant look in their eyes. Hajime sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and lent the girls Donner and Schlag.

“Here I go! Take that!”

Shea wasn’t prepared for the recoil, and her shot went wide.

“Hmm, despite the simple principles it works off of, this weapon is quite difficult to handle.”

Thanks to Tio’s draconic strength the recoil didn’t affect her, but her aim was still off.

“Kaori, the target’s over there.”

“I could say the same to you, Yue. You’re supposed to be shooting in front of you.”

Neither Yue nor Kaori could hit their targets either. After a few shots, Yue at least got the hang of it enough to graze the edge of the target.

“Well, I expected that to happen,” Hajime said with a wry smile.

What he didn’t expect though, was the speed at which Myu learned.

“Daddy, I need a new target.”

Hajime had been watching Myu out of the corner of his eye to make sure she didn’t do anything dangerous. So he hadn’t properly seen her shots. He pulled out some bullets, not realizing at first that she’d asked for a target, not more ammunition. He looked over at Myu’s target, and saw that she’d pulverized it already.

“Myu, let’s try putting the target a little farther away this time.”

“Bring it on!”

Hajime made a mental note to speak with Tio about the kinds of words she taught Myu and put the target twice as far out this time. Twenty meters away. Myu took the stance Hajime had taught her and fired.

Her first shot missed by a mile. Just as Hajime thought he’d overestimated her, he watched her second shot graze the edge of the target. Yue and the others were watching her now as well. Myu’s third shot was only ten centimeters away from the center.

“Hey, are you kidding me?”

Myu’s fourth shot hit the target dead center. Her fifth and sixth shots were a few centimeters off, but they were still within the bulls-eye.

“M-Myu, you think you’d be interested in shooting a moving target now?”

“I wanna try it!”

Within ten shots, Myu was able to shoot down the practice plane Hajime was moving around for her. Even when he tried moving the planes in unpredictable patterns, Myu would be able to read their movements after a few missed shots.

“Want to try sniping now?”

“Yeah!”

Myu held out her hand and Hajime crafted a miniature sniper rifle for her. He gave it to her and showed her the proper posture for sniping. Myu did as she was instructed and tucked in her elbows, stood up straight, and pressed the gun’s stock against her cheek. She looked through the scope at her target and saw a dummy plane hovering one hundred meters away. No matter how good she was, no one was expecting Myu to hit this. But she betrayed all expectations. With a shot even a pro sniper would be proud of, she shot down Hajime’s dummy plane.



“Daddy, what’s next?”

“Oh, uh, here, try this.”

Hajime looked at Myu with newfound respect. Myu proceeded to cheerfully shoot down the next ten planes Hajime prepared for her. It was only the moment she pulled the trigger that Myu’s eyes narrowed into the sharp glare of a falcon. Once he started moving the targets again, even Myu couldn’t get them every time. Still, her accuracy was uncanny. Enough to leave Hajime and the others dumbfounded.

“Hajime-kun. Are you sure Myu-chan isn’t your real daughter?”

At Kaori’s words, everyone turned to Hajime. It was clear to everyone that her talent as a marksman was unparalleled.

“Mmrgh, I’m not as good as Daddy yet. I was off by five millimeters.”

“.....”

Most people wouldn’t even have noticed they were off by five millimeters. After seeing his daughter’s unbelievable talent, he couldn’t bring himself to deny Kaori’s accusation. He simply stared off into the distance, wondering what the future held.

The Evolution of the Bunny Girl

Hajime and the others were currently heading from Brooke to the independent merchant city of Fuhren. They’d taken on a request to guard a caravan heading to Fuhren, and they were in the middle of taking a short break before resuming their journey. The fields around the road were overgrown with weeds which swayed gently in the mild breeze.

The highway they were on took them roughly westward, but it snaked through the fields in a convoluted series of twists and turns. Far to the north, mountains dotted the horizon. To the south, one would normally be able to see the Reisen Gorge, but right now the magnificent view of the gorge was blocked by a series of low hills.

“Haah! Hiyaah! Take thaaaat!”

The merchants and the other adventurers hired to guard the caravan were all lounging around, smoking or drinking. But a short distance away, one could hear a cute girl’s spirited yells. Wondering what was going on, the other adventurers all turned to see a bunny girl doing a rather strange dance. She was wearing one of those revealing outfits members of the rabbit tribe were fond of, and every time she jumped her massive knockers bounced up and down. Naturally, all of the male adventurers and merchants found themselves unable to look away.

“Hey, whitehead. What’s Shea-chan doing?” One of the

adventurers asked Hajime. He was from Brooke so he'd been around for all the fuss Hajime had caused back in the town, and they'd talked enough along the way that neither of them felt any need to stand on formality. Incidentally, whitehead was the nickname the adventurers had unanimously given Hajime.

"She's practicing martial arts. Though it's all stuff I taught her and I don't really know martial arts myself, so it's probably not the correct forms or anything."

"Huh...? Never thought I'd see a rabbit girl trying to learn martial arts. Her hair's a weird color too, so maybe she's just different."

Considering most rabbitmen were timid, peace-loving creatures, it certainly was strange that Shea was actively trying to master martial arts. Some of the other adventurers who'd been listening in on the conversation nodded in understanding, then turned back to Shea.

"Hiyaaaaa! Haaah! Uryaaaaaaaah!"

Though her shouts were somewhat lacking in vigor, her movements were impressive. As she dashed forward and launched an elbow strike, her boobs jiggled. As she followed that up with a powerful roundhouse kick, her boobs jiggled. From there she jumped into the air and fired off another roundhouse kick. Upon landing, she shot out a palm strike, and naturally, her boobs jiggled.

"Nice going, Shea-chan! You look great!"

"You got this, Shea-chan! Keep going!"

"Yeah! Show us another jump! Give it all you've got!"

"You're the best, Shea-chan! Puff your chest out for more oomph!"

"You've gotta raise your legs higher when you kick! High enough that we can see it all!"

The adventurers, or more specifically the male adventurers, were all entranced by Shea's martial dance. Naturally, Hajime wasn't going to just let these adventurers catcall her. If they wanted to watch, they'd have to pay the price of admission. *Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang.*

"Bwah!" "Gah!" "Ngh!" "Novembeeeeeer!" "Fothermuckeeeee!" The adventurers who'd been cheering a second ago flew through the air. As they landed on the ground, the female adventurers and merchants all gave them cold stares.

"Huh? Why'd you suddenly start firing your gun, Hajime-san?"

"Don't worry about it. Keep practicing, Shea."

"O-Okay... If you say so."

Shea had cut her training short when she heard Hajime fire his revolvers. Though she had no idea why several adventurers were currently lying on the ground, she nevertheless did as Hajime said and resumed her training.

"Damn erotic rabbit... It's scary how she doesn't even realize what she's doing."

“Like you’re one to talk, Yue.”

Yue looked genuinely awestruck by Shea’s natural ability to seduce people, even though she was no different. Hajime had gotten used to ignoring how lacking in self-awareness his companions were, but he couldn’t help but mutter, “You’re just as erotic you know...” For the next half an hour or so, Hajime split his time between correcting Shea’s forms and shooting the male adventurers every time they regained consciousness. The female adventurers, on the other hand, spent most of the break chastising their male companions.

“Huh?” “Mmm?” “Hweh?”

Just as their break was wrapping up, Hajime, Yue, and Shea suddenly glanced toward the hills. Noticing the sudden change, one of the adventurers asked Hajime, “What’s up, whitehead?”

“Looks like we’re under attack. There’s an armed group headed toward us.”

Veteran adventurers that they were, no one asked Hajime how he knew that. Instead, they just simply drew their weapons and shouted out warnings to the adventurers farther back. A second later, thirty or so bandits crested a nearby hill and loosed battle cries as they charged toward the caravan. The merchants hurriedly retreated to the safety of their wagons while the adventurers prepared to fight. But before they could loose any spells or arrows, Hajime held out a hand to stop them. They shot him confused looks, but Hajime ignored them and turned to Shea.

“Shea, these guys are the perfect training dummies to test your martial arts on. Wipe them out.”

“Huh? Ummm, you mean by myself?”

“Yeah, by yourself.”

“Barehanded?”

“Yep.”

The other adventurers gave Hajime incredulous looks. Surely he wasn’t going to ask a single rabbit girl to take on thirty bandits all by herself? Even those who had an inkling of how strong Shea really was were aghast. “He’s a demon...” they muttered to themselves. As expected, Shea didn’t seem too keen on the idea.

“Shea. I’ll consider rewarding you if—”

“Hell yeaaaaaaaaaah! Bring it on, bitches!”

Hajime didn’t even get to finish saying, “you beat them all” before Shea cut him off. She turned to face the charging bandits and, with a fearless smile, slammed her fists together, creating a massive shockwave. A huge gust of wind rippled outward, and the bandits all turned to Shea. A vulgar smile spread across their leader’s face.

“Oi, don’t lay a finger on that white-haired kid’s bunny, you louts. I’m gonna make her my—”

“Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Before he could finish his statement, Shea dashed up to him and punched him in the face with all her might. He was lifted into the air and sent flying past the far side of the hill. Shea had leaped forward with such force that there was a crater where she'd been standing a moment before. The other bandits shivered in fear. But they quickly recovered their wits. While Shea's punch may have been powerful, they were certain they could take her as long as they surrounded her and fought cautiously. In response, Shea dropped into a proper stance. She kept her hands high, near her face, with one foot slightly raised off the ground. One of the bandits charged her, his sword held high. But before he could swing it down on her, Shea fired off a lightning-quick front kick. It hit the poor bandit with the force of a cannonball.

“Bwaaagh!?”

His eyes rolled up into his skull and he lost consciousness. But Shea wasn't done yet. Before the bandit could hit the ground, she followed up with a powerful left hook to the chin. The bandit flew backward like a ragdoll. Shea then turned to the other bandits and dispatched them in short order, using a combination of compact kicks, jabs, hooks, and punches. Before long, a pile of corpses littered the hill. Surprisingly, Shea seemed to have mastered the basics of Muay Thai.

“Y-You monster!” one of the bandits screamed.

“Bwahahahahaha!” Shea just laughed in reply.

Two of the remaining bandits tried to pincer Shea. She quickly dropped her Muay Thai stance and cartwheeled out of the way. At the same time, she used her legs to crush the windpipes of the two men surrounding her. Another one of the bandits launched a spear thrust at her landing spot, but she wheeled out of the way and used the force of her spin to shatter his skull with a roundhouse kick. She'd gone from the sharp, choppy movements of a Muay Thai fighter to the rhythmical, graceful strikes of a capoeira fighter. But while this dance-like martial art was more graceful than Muay Thai, it was no less deadly.

“L-Lord of fire hear my—”

“Too late!”

One of the bandits tried chanting a spell, but Shea quickly jumped over to him. She stamped on the ground hard enough to cause a miniature earthquake, then hit the bandit with an elbow to the solar plexus. He flew backward while coughing up blood. Shea didn't even bother to check whether or not he was dead. She turned to her remaining foes and struck them down with a flurry of elbows, palm strikes, and punches, all while fluidly shuffling between their attacks. She'd swapped styles again, this time to Bajiquan.

“G-Goddamnniiiiit!”

“Take thiiiiiiiiiiiis!”

Desperate, the few surviving bandits rushed Shea all at once. She deftly dodged between them and wrapped her arm around the neck of one of her foes as she passed. A perfect wrestling lariat. The bandit flipped through the air a few times before crumpling to the ground like a ragdoll. Another one of the bandits tried to shoot an arrow at her but she ran forward and kneed him in the face before he could even nock his bow. The archer next to him barely had time to scream before she dispatched him as well, this time with a backward suplex. Three styles hadn't been enough for her so she'd added pro wrestling techniques into the mix as well. After that, she started using thrusts and Dempsey Rolls and one-armed shoulder throws and all sorts of other techniques from every martial art known to man. She was clearly pumped to get her reward. Within a few minutes, the bandits were all dead or dying.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Shea pumped both fists into the air and proclaimed her victory to the world. Shivering, Yue muttered, “Shea's terrifying...”

“You can say that again. I can't believe she mastered all those techniques just from the half-assed examples I showed her...” Hajime responded with a stiff expression. After that incident, all of the adventurers started calling Shea “Shea-san” instead of “Shea-chan.” Hajime had no doubt the worthless rabbit of the forest would soon become a CQC god.

The Handsome Rabbit and the Iron Boy

Hajime Nagumo's heart was filled with panic and confusion. He was currently deep inside a rugged cavern dimly lit by green glowstones. Said cavern was far below what people considered the Great Orcus Labyrinth, and what Hajime had dubbed the depths of the abyss. Hajime had come to the labyrinth with his classmates and had fallen down here when one of them had betrayed him.

Miraculously, he hadn't died in the fall. Determined to escape, he'd dragged himself out of the river he'd fallen in and started walking. But soon, he ran into a rabbit-shaped monster far more powerful than anything he'd faced so far. Said monster had been capable of taking out four wolf-monsters that were each twice its size, using nothing but its abnormally powerful legs.

All the other monsters Hajime had fought, even the Behemoth, were nothing compared to this. If that rabbit found him, he was dead. With cold sweat pouring down his face, Hajime slowly backed away.

But he was so nervous he made a fatal mistake. As he was backing

up, his foot struck a pebble. It rattled across the floor, sounding louder than it had any right to. Hajime slowly turned toward the rabbit. Naturally, it was staring right at him. Its white fur was crisscrossed with grotesque red veins that pulsed every few seconds.

It's coming. The moment Hajime thought that, the rabbit darted forward with a powerful leap and raised one of its abnormally thick legs high in the air. Hajime closed his eyes, not wanting to see the moment of his death. However—

“Huh...?”

The blow Hajime was expecting never came, so he timidly opened his eyes. The rabbit lowered its raised leg and gave Hajime a puzzled look. It seemed confused as to what exactly Hajime was. Of course, Hajime had no idea what kind of creature this rabbit was, either. He wanted to ask, but he was too terrified to.

“Mkyu? Kyukyukyu?”

“Huh? Wh-What?”

“Mkyukyu. Kyuumkyu?”

“U-Umm...”

Though he had no idea why this monster was trying to talk to him, Hajime was nevertheless relieved that he wasn't about to get killed. Still, he had no idea what the monster was saying, and his confusion remained. He tried using hand gestures to try and explain that he fell down here and wanted to get back to the surface.

“Mkyu.”

“Wait, you understood that!?”

To Hajime's utter surprise, the rabbit nodded. A second later though, the rabbit's fur stood on end and it whirled around. When it saw what was approaching it let out a whimper and took a few steps back. Still confused, Hajime turned to see what the rabbit was looking at. A massive monster was approaching them from the far end of the corridor. It had white fur and red veins like the rabbit, but its size was on a whole different level. And it looked like a bear. But unlike a normal bear, its arms were unnaturally long.

Hajime realized instantly that he was looking at death in physical form. Terrified, he opened his mouth to scream. But before he could, he felt something soft brush past him.

“Th-The rabbit?”

Indeed, it was the rabbit. It stood protectively in front of Hajime, guarding him from the bear. Even though it was a monster, one of the natural enemies of mankind. *This can't be possible.* But it was possible. Hajime was seeing it happen in front of his eyes. The rabbit kept its eyes trained on the Claw Bear, but it bent its ears in the direction of the passage directly behind it.

“A-Are you telling me to run away?”

“Kyu.”

It seemed it was. *Why're you helping me?* Hajime's mind was full of questions, but there wasn't any time. The rabbit squeaked again, and Hajime returned to his senses. He quickly got to his feet and started running. Loathe to let its prey escape, the Claw Bear roared and charged. It moved with surprising agility for its size. Within seconds, it had reached the rabbit. It roared again and swung down a massive paw. The rabbit had been expecting the blow though, and it lithely dodged to the side. It landed on the wall and rebounded off it. It then landed behind the Claw Bear and launched a low kick at the huge monster's legs. There was a loud thud as the kick connected. But the Claw Bear was the strongest monster on this floor, and it wouldn't be brought down so easily. The rabbit's kick wasn't even enough to stagger it. In response, the Claw Bear swung one of its lanky arms backward. Sharp claws of wind slammed into the small rabbit.

“Kyuuuuuuuu!”

It screamed in pain as it was flung backward. A second later it hit the wall with a sickening thud. Blood spurted from a huge gash in its shoulder as it slid to the ground. Though it had avoided taking a lethal hit, the rabbit wasn't in any shape to fight. The Claw Bear slowly approached it. It reached out with a paw, confident its meal could no longer fight back. The rabbit neither trembled in fear nor struggled to escape. It didn't even avert its gaze from the Claw Bear. If it was going to die, it was going to die with dignity. Irrked by the rabbit's prideful gaze, the Claw Bear roared and raised its paw to maul the rabbit beyond recognition.

“T-Transmuuuuuuuute!”

“Kyu!?”

Suddenly, the wall behind the rabbit melted away in a puddle of mud, and a hand stuck out to grab it. Both the rabbit and the Claw Bear were completely taken aback. By the time the bear had returned to its senses, the rabbit was gone, and the wall had returned to its former shape. Its howls of frustration echoed throughout the floor.

“Mkyu? Mkyukyu?”

Inside the tiny cavern, Hajime had transmuted inside the wall, the young boy was desperately trying to treat the rabbit's wounds.

“Ummm... why did I save you? Is that what you're asking?”

The rabbit nodded in assent. Hajime smiled awkwardly and replied, “Haha, I'm not sure, honestly. But I could tell that bear monster was really strong and... that you wouldn't be able to beat it. And when I thought of how you'd be sacrificing yourself to save me, my body just moved on its own.”

The rabbit gave Hajime a puzzled look, its beady crimson eyes

open wide. A second later, it realized that the young boy was trembling in fear. He was putting on a brave front, but he was terrified. Considering how afraid Hajime had been of a weaker monster like the rabbit, it made sense that he'd be scared stiff when up against something like the Claw Bear. But despite his fear, Hajime had come back for the rabbit. For a monster he'd just met. The monster had saved Hajime, and that was reason enough for Hajime to save the monster. Judging by how Hajime was still in shock, the rabbit doubted he was aware that was why he'd done it.

"Kyu."

"Ummm, are you thanking me? Ahaha, are you really a monster?"

In an attempt to reassure Hajime, the rabbit stroked his shoulder with its ears. The gesture helped Hajime calm down, and he smiled weakly.

Afterward, Hajime and the rabbit had a lengthy conversation that involved a lot of wild hand signs and body language. Eventually, Hajime set off looking for a way to return to the surface. Unwilling to part ways with the boy, the rabbit decided to tag along. After many days of fruitless searching, Hajime and the rabbit discovered something. A jewel set deep into the wall that was emitting a pale blue light. Upon examining it, Hajime discovered it stored an unbelievably vast quantity of mana, as well as the ability to instill its mana into other metals and minerals. Not only that, it moved according to the will of whoever touched it.

"With this... we might actually be able to..."

"Mkyu?"

The rabbit cocked its head, but Hajime was too excited to respond. He'd finally found something he could use.

Two weeks later, a strange pair confronted the floor's strongest monster, the Claw Bear. One was a rabbit monster with strange metal greaves on its legs. The other was a human covered from head to toe in armor—Hajime.

"Alright, rabbit. Let's kill this monster and get out of here!"

"Mkyuukyu! (Let's do this, partner!)"

At some point within the last two weeks, Hajime and the rabbit had become able to communicate perfectly. To everyone's surprise, it was Hajime who moved first. There was a metallic clang as a visor covered his face. A second later, the visor's eye sockets began to glow. The pale blue rock ensconced in the center of his breastplate began to glow as well, and Hajime stuck out his hands. Waves of highly compressed mana shot out of his palms, blasting the unsuspecting Claw Bear. The bear just barely managed to raise its arms to defend itself in time. But the force of the shockwaves was so great that it

broke both of its arms and left them a bloody mess.

Seeing an opening, the rabbit rushed the bear from the side. The bear used one of its broken arms to swipe at the rabbit, but the rabbit blocked with one armored leg. Meanwhile, Hajime used mana shockwaves from both palms and both soles to propel himself into the air and somersault behind the bear. As he landed he threw a punch at the bear's back. The bear staggered momentarily, and the rabbit took that opportunity to hit it with a roundhouse kick. As its leg neared the bear, sharp blades shot out of its greaves, slicing through the bear's arm and cutting it off.

Screaming in pain, the bear wildly flailed its remaining arm around in an attempt to get Hajime and the rabbit off of it. However, Hajime's iron armor protected him from the bear's attacks, while the rabbit sheltered behind him. Once Hajime saw an opening in the bear's attacks, he reached forward and grabbed the bear's arm. From there he used his power suit's propulsion to rip the bear's arm off. At the same time, he activated the suit's core and fired a blast of mana from his chest, blowing a huge hole in the Claw Bear's stomach. The bear struggled to fight back, but without its arms it was powerless. The rabbit leaped into the air and launched a meteor kick at the bear's head. The kick crushed the bear's skull, killing it instantly. The fight came to an abrupt end, and silence filled the corridor. There was a high-pitched whirring noise, as Hajime powered down his suit. He walked toward the rabbit and raised his hand high. The rabbit hopped up and tapped it with a foot, giving him a high-five.

"This proves it. We're strong enough to fight now. Let's go, rabbit!"

"Kyukyukuyumkyu! (I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, Iron Man!)"

The rabbit hopped onto Hajime's shoulder, and the two of them clanked their way deeper into the abyss.

"That's the dream I had last night."

"And... that's why you made that armor?"

Hajime stood in Oscar Orcus' living room, clad from head to toe in iron armor. Yue gave him an exasperated look, and he averted his gaze. While the metal suit did raise Hajime's defensive capabilities, it made his unique gun-based fighting style impossible. Little wonder Yue was exasperated with his experiment. However, the idea of overcoming immeasurable odds by building a suit of armor in a cave just seemed so cool to Hajime. He was, after all, a guy.

"Take it off..."

"....."

Hajime's body language made it clear that he'd rather die.

“You have a metal arm, isn’t that enough?” Yue asked doggedly. Hajime closed his visor in response. His eyes glowed menacingly, daring anyone to make him remove the suit. Yue just sighed in response. She felt like an older sister trying to keep her younger brother in check. A second later though, an idea came to her. She grinned seductively and licked her lips. Hajime shivered, and took a few clanking steps backward. Running away suddenly seemed like a very good idea.

“Fine, don’t take it off... I’ll take it off for you.”

Afterward, Hajime had both his armor and his clothes stripped off by Yue.

A Delicious “Something”

There was a nervous tension in the air at a certain roadside spring.

“Hmmmhmmhmmhmm! Hack ’em, chop ’em, slash ’em!”

“Gheajoiuhjajoiwawjoiajaaaaaaah!”

Shea was humming cheerfully to herself as she cooked, though the words she was humming were quite ominous. The scream was coming from the chopping board where a fish... or rather a strange *thing* was lying. Technically, the creature’s meter-long body was that of a fish. But there was one part of it that made it difficult to think of it as a fish. Specifically, its head. Which looked like a cow’s head. But unlike a cow, it had bloodshot eyes and a chameleon’s tongue. Furthermore, a hundred tiny legs jutted out from the bottom half of the fish, like a centipede.

While the party had been resting near the spring, Shea’s ears had suddenly perked up and she’d muttered “Hmm? Is this the legendary delicacy of the forest I sense?” A second later she’d picked up a pebble and launched it into the spring. There’d been a dull thunk as the pebble hit something, then this strange fish-like creature had floated up to the surface.

“You’re one of the fairies that live in the forest’s springs! One of those very, very delicious fairies! What are you doing here? Oh well, who cares. All that matters is that you’re delicious!”

The terrified “fairy of the forest” wiggled its centipede legs, its bloodshot eyes open wide in terror. But Shea showed it no mercy and began cooking. Every time she sliced off one of the fish-thing’s scales with her knife, it screamed in agony. Blood poured out of its open wounds, coating Shea’s hands, but she didn’t seem the least bit concerned.

“H-Hey, Yue...” Hajime whispered. “Is that what all fairies look like in this world? The fairies I’ve read about back on earth look

more... you know, cute and mystical and stuff.”

“The fairy tales I read as a child said fairies look like young girls with wings... I think they’re not that different from the fairies in your world. At the very least, I’m sure that disgusting creature isn’t a fairy.”

“Shea claims it’s delicious, but if you ask me it does not look appetizing in the slightest,” Tio added with a shiver.

Surprisingly, even Hajime was put off by Shea’s attitude. Naturally, Yue was even more terrified, as evidenced by her stiff expression. Not even Tio, the resident pervert, could keep a straight face. However, Shea seemed unaware of her companions’ disgust, and she continued humming to herself as she cooked.

“Carve ’em, crush ’em, flay ’em!”

What’s the point of crushing it!? Hajime thought to himself with a shiver. He wanted to say something to Shea, but when he saw how happily she was torturing the poor fish-fairy-thing with her cooking knife, he couldn’t bring himself to call out to her. The smile on her face was completely at odds with the blood and guts flying all over the place.

“Even when you cut its head off, it survives!”

“Nogyhoaijdhhodajhgoaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Even when you scrape its heart out, it moves!”

“Aghaejasoihaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Its screams are like music to your ears! The perfect seasoning!”

“Rgajoiaghjahaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Shea continued chopping through the fish-fairy-thing with perfect precision. Within minutes, it had been filleted. There was so much gore on the chopping board that it looked like a huge battle had taken place atop it.

“Oi. Didn’t that thing just scream, ‘Save me’? I’m not imagining things, right!? How is it still screaming after being chopped into pieces, anyway!?”

This was the most disturbing thing Hajime had ever seen in his life. Yue replied, “Don’t ask me... I didn’t see anything. I didn’t hear anything. I don’t know anything.”

Hajime turned to find her crouching on the ground with her eyes shut and both hands over her ears. She couldn’t bear to see her surrogate little sister turn into such a horrifying monster. Meanwhile, Tio, who had the highest mental fortitude out of everyone was—

“Oh look, a butterfly. How cute...” chasing butterflies with a vacant look on her face. *The fuck!? Aren’t you supposed to be a wise, centuries-old dragon!?* Hajime thought despairingly to himself. But he didn’t say it out loud, because he understood Tio’s feelings all too well.

Having finished all the prep work, Shea took out the stove Hajime

had transmuted and turned up the heat. She then placed a Chinese-style wok over the flames. Lying on the cutting board next to the stove was the fish-fairy-thing, looking thoroughly chopped. Despite having been cut up into such fine pieces that it was hard to tell what it had originally been, it was still twitching occasionally. Shea stir-fried some vegetables inside the wok for a few minutes before adding the chunks of fish-fairy-thing, her apron still covered with blood and gore.

The moment the meat chunks hit the pan—

“Hiyagjdiaodhjaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Hooooooooooooooooooooot!”

“Hey, it totally just said the word hot right there! I didn’t imagine that, right!?”

Unable to bear hearing the screams any longer, Hajime finally worked up the courage to yell that to Shea. Shea turned back to him, a confused look on her face. Her expression might have been cute if her cheek wasn’t covered in blood splatter, and she wasn’t holding a knife in one hand.

“What are you saying, Hajime-san? There’s no way a fish could speak human—”

“JGOIASjgaoghahoaijsjhoasjhaioijhoaj! What’re you doing to meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!?”

“Could speak human words!”

“Wait, no, hang on a sec! It *just* said something again! Didn’t you hear that? It said, ‘What’re you doing to me?’ I heard it clearly!”

“Huh? Hajime-san, I think you’re—”

“Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo! You’ll pay for this! Oooooooooooooooooo!”

“You’re just tired.”

“I’m not the one who looks like they’re possessed! That fish totally just said it’s never gonna forgive you just now! How can you ignore that!?”

There was a tinge of desperation in Hajime’s voice now. However, Shea just gave him a pitying look and said, “Yeah, you’re definitely tired. Don’t worry, my cooking’ll give you the energy you need!” Shea turned back to her work with renewed vigor.

“Damnit, Shea’s too far gone now. Yue, burn that strange fish-fairy-thing until there’s nothing left!”

“Roger...”

At Hajime’s signal, Yue raised her hand to summon her Draconic Thunder. However—

“Yue-san, I told you before not to waste food, right?”

“Ah, sorry.”

Yue prostrated herself before Shea. She still vividly remembered what had happened last time she’d messed with Shea’s cooking.

“Ngh, looks like I’ve got no other choice. Tio, show her the might

of dragons! Use your breath!”

“I was hoping you would order me next! Fear not, Mas—”

“Tio-san, do you want to die?”

“Ah, sorry.”

Tio prostrated herself before Shea. She hadn’t forgotten how Shea had nearly split her head with Drucken during their first fight. Realizing he’d have to rely on his own skills, Hajime reached for one of his hand grenades.

“Here you go, Hajime-san. This is a delicacy back in the Haltina Woods. Eat up before it gets cold!”

But he was too late. Shea had already heaped some fish-fairy-thing and stir-fry vegetables onto his plate. Even after being fried, the fish-fairy-thing’s meat chunks were still twitching. Hajime gave Shea a hesitant look. “You really want me to eat that?” it seemed to say. Shea nodded, grinning. Seeing that Hajime was still hesitating, Shea muttered, “Sheesh, you’re such a little kid.” She then grabbed a chunk of meat and plopped into her mouth, saying, “See, it’s safe!” Hajime was already used to eating raw monster meat, he couldn’t let himself get shown up by this worthless bunny girl. Reluctantly, Hajime speared a chunk of fish on his fork. Yue and Tio watched on with trepidation as he brought the meat to his mouth.

“...Holy shit. This is good!”

Indeed, it was delicious. Oddly enough though, the juicy meat was tinged with the taste of regret.

The Most Beautiful Perverted Dragon

A moon much larger than the earth’s moon illuminated the ocean’s surface. Drifting clouds cast faint shadows over the waves, but they were not enough to dull the gleaming silver moonlight that drove back the darkness of the night.

“What do you think, Master? Was this enough to grant your wish?”

A lone shadow flitted across the moonlit sky, cutting through the wind at surprising speed. That shadow was the obsidian-scaled yellow-eyed dragon, Tio. Her beautiful scales scintillated in the moonlight, and her graceful flight through the sea of stars would have captivated anyone who happened to see her. Sitting on her back was a white-haired boy wearing a black mantle... Hajime. He closed his eyes, looking more relaxed than ever.

“Yeah. I never imagined I’d be able to ride on the back of a dragon one day. It’s like a fairy tale... Thanks for giving me one of the best moments of my life, Tio.”

Unused to receiving sincere gratitude from Hajime, Tio fidgeted

bashfully. Brimming with joy, she said, “There is no need to thank me, Master. Just knowing that you are mounting me is enough to... Haaah... Haaah... Guhehehe.”

Hajime frowned and said, “Hey, pervert. Shut the fuck up.”
“!?”

A joyous roar echoed through the night sky.

Drink, but Don't Get Drunk Part I

“Perfect. Looks like everyone’s seated. Alright, let the celebration party for reaching the 70th floor begin!”

Knight Captain Meld’s voice echoed throughout a tiny bar located in a corner of Horaud. This bar was a favorite of Meld’s, and though he hadn’t reserved it outright, everyone in the labyrinth exploration team was here to take a break and celebrate. He’d ordered all of his favorite dishes for the group, and true to his word, each and every one of them was delicious. The amber liquid accompanying the food was perfect for whetting one’s appetite as well.

Originally, Kaori hadn’t been too interested in the party, thinking that if there was time to celebrate, there was time to train. But she’d found the amber liquid surprisingly to her liking, and now she was busy guzzling down tankard after tankard. The liquid was a special kind of Tortus beer, and though it had no alcohol content, it was still capable of getting people drunk. Meld had organized this party because he’d wanted the kids to be able to let loose and forget the rigors of dungeon delving for at least a day. But as a result—

“Hey, are you listening to me, Meld-san? You better not be ignoring me when I’m trying to tell you what’s so cool about Nagumo-kun. You want me to bombard you with healing magic? Well, do you?”

“D-Don’t worry, Kaori. I’m listening. Also, how is that a threat? Healing magic will just heal me, there’s no use—”

“How dare you call healing magic useless! Fine, I won’t tell you about Nagumo-kun, you meanie! I should have known no knight would listen to me!”

“C-Calm down, Kaori. You’re not making any sense. Besides, what do you mean you should have—”

But Kaori was in no mood to listen to Meld’s protests. Red-faced, eyes unfocused, she brandished her white staff at Meld. Every time she swung it at him, cute sparkles trailed out of it. Those sparkles possessed healing properties, so even though she accidentally smacked her staff into other adventurers, the barkeeper, and even Endou Kousuke, none of them were actually hurt. In fact, thanks to the sparkles, Kaori looked more like a magical girl than a threatening foe. Sighing, Meld reached out to Kaori to try and calm her down. But before he could—

“Sob... *Sniffle*... Captaaaaaaaain!”

“Whoa, Shizuku? Wait, why are you crying!?”

Shizuku tugged on Meld’s jacket. She was sitting on the floor,

head buried in her knees, crying. Surprised, Meld dodged out of the way of Kaori's swings, then crouched down next to her.

"I can't take it anymore! I wanna go homeeeee!"

Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"H-Hey, Shizuku!?"

"Daddyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy. Waaaaaaah!"

"D-Daddy!? Shizuku, I'm not... Wait, hang on, stop crying!"

Damnit, so Kaori turns into a violent drunk while Shizuku becomes a crying drunk!?"

Meld glanced about helplessly as the usually stoic Shizuku clung to his jacket and cried her heart out. Pathetic as it was, Meld realized he couldn't handle these two alone. So he turned to the hero for help. As he blocked another one of Kaori's swings, he shouted, "Hey, Kouki! Do something about your friends—"

"Celestial Flash!"

A shockwave of pure white light slammed into the bar's wall.

"What the heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeell!? Kouki, what're you doing!?"

Meld's eyes nearly popped out of his skull. Kouki, who appeared to be dead drunk, suddenly looked up sharply and shouted, "I found the enemy! Let's do this! Celestial Flash! Celestial Flash! Celestial Flash! Super Celestial Flash! Ultra Celestial Flash! Mega! Super! Ultra! Celestial Flaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaash!"

Kouki started haphazardly firing off Celestial Flashes in all directions.

"Calm down! Aaaaah, stop attacking the walls, and the ceiling, and those adventurers, and Kousuke!"

Victims started piling up one after another. The poor, bald barkeeper teared up as he saw what was happening to his precious bar.

"Aaaaah, this was my favorite bar!" Meld shouted, then continued, "Damnit, Ryutarou, help me stop—"

"Hmph, behold, my bulging muscles!"

Meld turned to Ryutarou, only to find the young boy had stripped off his shirt and was showing off his body. To be specific, he was posing like a bodybuilder while smiling happily. It was actually a surprisingly cool pose.

"What the hell are you doing!? And where'd your clothes go!?"

"Meld-san, you have some pretty good muscles, too. But they're no match for me, especially not after how much I trained since coming here!"

"Who cares about that!? Goddamn idioooooooooot! And don't take your pants off!" Meld screamed in despair. He couldn't bear to watch as Ryutarou started removing his pants as well. Ryutarou was at least wearing underwear beneath them, so it wasn't a complete disaster.

However, after a few more seconds of posing, Ryutarou suddenly shouted, “Damn, this stupid piece of cloth is in the way!” and started reaching for his underwear.

“Like hell I’ll let the hero party get arrested for public indecency!”

Meld cast so fast it almost seemed like he’d invoked magic without an incantation, and a second later a huge gust of wind blew through the bar. It swept Ryutarou off his feet and prevented him from stripping off his underwear. But of course, one of the hardened members of the Hero Party wouldn’t go down that easily. “N-Nice shot, Meld-san! But I won’t lose to you!” Ryutarou shouted, and once again reached for his underwear. Panicking, Meld tried to pin him down, but—

“Listen to me, Captaaaaaaaaaaaaaain!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Daaaaaaaaaddy!”

“Blagh!? Kaori! Stop trying to bind me! And Shizuku, I’ll pretend to be your dad, so just stop crying! Here, I’ll even feed you! Ah, Kaori! Stop smacking me with your staff! Damnit, when’d you get so skilled with that thing!? Are you sure your job’s not secretly spear-wielder!? Fuck, how did I get into this mess!?”

Meld found himself pinned down by a combination of Shizuku clinging to him and Kaori casting Binding Chains of Light on him. He dodged Kaori’s spear thrusts using only his upper body, while desperately casting wind blasts at Ryutarou to keep him from stripping. It turned out it wasn’t a good idea to give the Hero Party fake alcohol. *I should never have done this!* Meld lamented.

“Alan, Kyle, everyone else who’s still conscious! Stop Kouki and the oth...ers?”

Meld called out to his knights, but then trailed off as he realized he didn’t sense any of them nearby. He glanced around in a panic.

“Everyone’s... gone...”

Indeed, none of his knights were around. In fact, even Nagayama, Suzu, Eri, and the other children had all left. The only other people in the bar were the barkeeper and Endou, both of whom were huddling in a corner. The moment he’d seen Kouki start to spam Celestial Flashes, Meld’s right-hand man, Alan, had taken the other kids and evacuated. Right now he was sitting in *his* favorite bar, holding another celebration party with the less rowdy kids. He’d also offered to treat the adventurers who’d been in Meld’s bar as an apology.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, I’m so lonely, Daddyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“Hey, you’re not ignoring me, right!? RIGHT!?”

“Hiyaaaaaaaaaaah! Celestial Frash!”

“Behold, my chiseled torso. Can any other body compare!?”

Meld slumped in despair when he realized his most trusted

lieutenant had betrayed him.

“Lord Ehit, please spare me such harsh trials...”

His muttered entreaty was lost amid the din of the bar. The next morning, the Hero Party awoke to find Meld lying in a pale heap upon the floor. When they saw the sorry state he was in, they all shouted, “Who could have done such an awful thing!?”

Drink, but Don't Get Drunk Part II

"A tree with pink flowers, huh? That reminds me of the cherry blossoms back in Japan," Hajime muttered quietly. He'd spotted the tree off to the side of the road as the party walked past. It was a stout, short tree with pink, heart-shaped flowers growing from all of its branches.

"Yeah. Come to think of it, I wasn't able to go flower-viewing this year. Everyone suddenly had plans the day we were supposed to go. Even though I was really looking forward to seeing them with Shizuku-chan," Kaori replied, looking wistfully at the lone tree.

"Cherry blossoms? Flower-viewing?"

"Are cherry blossoms a kind of flower in your world, Hajime-san?"

"Judging by what you said, I assume those flowers bloom only once a year? And that it is a custom in your world to go see them?"

Yue, Shea, and Tio all turned curiously to Hajime. Myu, who was sitting in Hajime's lap, also gave him a questioning look, and he smiled back at her. He then went on to explain to everyone that cherry blossoms were one of the representative plants of his home country and that it was a tradition for everyone to go see them bloom in spring.

"But well, even though it's called flower-viewing, it's really just an excuse for people to go out and party. Spring is considered the season of beginnings in Japan, too. Anyway, the point is flower-viewing is just a pretense really."

"I won't deny that, but... there are some people who are just there to appreciate the flowers, you know?"

Kaori smiled bitterly as she recalled how often people were shipped to hospitals because of alcohol poisoning every spring. But even so, she tried to defend flower-viewing's honor.

"That... sounds super fun! Daddy, I wanna do this flower-viewing thing too!"

"Huh? Seriously? All we're gonna do is sit under the tree and eat food and chat, you know?"

"That's fine! I wanna do it!"

Seeing how excited Myu was to try flower-viewing, Hajime smiled awkwardly. He gave his comrades a questioning look, to see what they thought. It wasn't as if they were in a rush to reach their destination. In fact, the moment they arrived at Erisen, they'd have to part with Myu. So they may as well make some more memories with her before it was time to say farewell.

"Mmm... Why not? A picnic beneath a tree sounds good. It's

almost lunchtime, anyway. Besides, I don't want this to be a memory only you and Kaori have."

"Did you *have* to put it like that, Yue?"

"In fact, you should delete your memories of flower viewing with Kaori."

"Hey, that's mean, Yue!"

Hajime ignored Yue and Kaori's catfight. Ever since Kaori had joined the party, this had kept happening, so he was used to it. He instead turned to Shea and Tio, both of whom seemed interested in experiencing flower-viewing. In the end, the group decided to hold an impromptu flower-viewing party beneath the Tortus version of a cherry blossom tree. They needed to eat lunch anyway, and it wouldn't take up much extra time. As always, Shea created an array of elaborate dishes for lunch, with Tio and Kaori serving as her assistants. Hajime, Yue, and Myu helped set the dishes and get everything else ready.

Thirty minutes later, the party was sitting on a fluffy sheet, staring at a table laden with food. To set the mood, Yue raised one hand into the air and snapped her fingers. A gentle breeze rustled the tree's branches, causing flower petals to dance through the air. It was a beautiful sight. One that evoked a sense of wonder and mystery.

"Wow, they're so pretty!" someone muttered softly. Suddenly, one of the petals landed on Myu's nose. Hajime and the others watched with a smile as she flailed about cutely, unsure of what to do. It was a peaceful, enjoyable party. Sadly, the peace didn't last.

One hour later—

"Are you listening to me, Hajime-san!? This is a veeeeery serious topic! Besides, you—"

"It feels so comfortable being by your side, Master. Please, allow me to stay here."

"Hajime... Don't you dare look away. Keep your eyes on me. And hug me."

"Stupid Hajime-kun! How come you're always surrounded by women!? Don't you know how much I love you!? Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Red-faced, Shea started lecturing the tree they were sitting under. Tio, on the other hand, had lost her usual perverted nature by getting drunk and was acting surprisingly seductive. Yue was throwing a tantrum because Hajime wasn't looking only at her, while Kaori was bawling incessantly and poking Hajime with her staff.

"How did this happen...?" Hajime muttered, shaking his head. He looked at the empty bottles scattered around their picnic area. He'd had a couple of bottles of high-proof alcohol that he'd mostly meant to

use as a disinfectant, but the girls had found the taste quite to their liking, and before long they'd all gotten drunk. Incidentally, Myu had already evacuated to the safety of the upper tree branches. She watched the other girls with barely concealed disgust.

"H-Hey, Tio. Get off of me. You're making Yue cry."

"So you can't make Yue cry, but you don't care if you make me cry?"

"You're a pervert who likes being ignored, anyway."

Hajime insulted Tio like usual, but this time the results were not what he was expecting.

"*Sob. Sniffle.* How could you be so cruel? But if that is what you wish, Master, I shall oblige."

Tio backed away, looking like she was about to break down. *This isn't what your personality's supposed to be like!* Hajime shouted in his mind. He couldn't help but feel guilty when he saw how devastated Tio looked.

"Also, Kaori, shut up! And stop stabbing me with your staff! That actually hurts, you know! How'd get so good at hurting people when you're supposed to be a healer anyway!?"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, Hajime-kun told me to shut uuuuuup! I hate you Hajime-kuuuuuuuuuun! How come you don't understand me!?"

Kaori unleashed a powerful three-pronged thrust, with each thrust aiming for one of Hajime's vitals. The first went for his forehead, the second for his throat, and the third for his heart. *What the hell!? Since when did you become a Rurouni Kenshin character?* Hajime desperately blocked all three thrusts with his prosthetic arm. At the same time, he fired an anchor from a slot in his arm and wrapped it around Kaori's body. Though he succeeded in binding her with it, she retaliated by casting Binding Chains of Light against him. Hajime quickly scooped up Yue, who was clinging to him, and leaped out of the way. Misunderstanding the situation entirely, Yue buried her face in Hajime's chest and squealed, "Oh Hajime, you're so rough."

"Now that Master has abandoned me... my only hope is to force myself onto him," Tio muttered quietly to herself. Coming to a decision, she got to her feet and loosened her kimono sash. Then, she started stripping in broad daylight. Meanwhile, Kaori continued spamming binding spells at Hajime. Her magic was surprisingly precise despite her bawling her eyes out. On the other hand, Yue wrapped her arms and legs around Hajime, losing herself in her delusions. Unfazed by all the commotion, Shea continued lecturing the tree.

"Daddy, everyone's going crazy!"

"Listen up, Myu. Make sure that if you ever drink alcohol, you

never become drunk. Or you'll end up like the girls here! Promise me you won't let alcohol control you!"

"I promise! But you're the one who gave them the bottles, Daddy!"

"I know, I'm sorry!"

It was rare to see the monster of the abyss apologize. That was just how much of a disaster things had become. For the next few hours, Hajime desperately tried to sober the girls up, while Myu cheered him on from her perch in the tree.

Unforgettable Warmth

A lone, small figure stood on one of Erisen's piers at dusk, enjoying the sea breeze. As Erisen was surrounded by ocean, there were piers at every edge of the city. However, the pier this figure always came to was the one that faced the continent. And it would always stand there for hours, looking forlornly out to sea. As if thinking of someone. As if waiting for someone. Quietly, all alone, the figure would watch. That figure was, of course, none other than the little girl Myu. And she was surprisingly famous within Erisen. People had already known her before, since she was the daughter of the beautiful Remia, but after a certain recent incident, her fame had grown.

Today, to the spectators' surprise, Myu sat down at the edge of the pier. Normally she'd just stand there, so naturally, the other residents were a little worried.

"You think Myu-chan's okay?"

"She's been like this every day since those guys left."

"Damn that white-haired brat. How dare he make Myu-chan sad!"

"You said it! I'm so jealous Myu calls him— I mean, I can't believe he left her even though she calls him Daddy!"

"Yeah, that guy's a disgrace to fathers everywhere. If I were Myu's dad, I'd never leave her alone like this. In fact, maybe I should become —"

"Yeah right, no way Remia's gonna marry a guy like you! You barely even make any money, you layabout! Know your goddamn place!"

"I know that's true, but can't you be nicer about it, man? You're hurting me here!"

The young dagon man who wished to be Myu's new father sighed forlornly and vanished into the sea. He wanted to go somewhere to cry in peace. The other dagons ignored him and turned their thoughts to Hajime. The man who'd suddenly appeared in Erisen and the man who Myu called Daddy. Worse, Remia didn't seem all that opposed to

marrying him. The men who'd all been fighting each other behind the scenes to earn the right to propose to Remia had all been shocked to learn she was considering remarrying an outsider. God, they hated that white-haired eye-patch wearing brat.

Not only had he destroyed one of their piers with a single stomp of his foot, he'd had brought an entire harem with him. One of whom was a legendary black dragon. Plus, he used his overwhelming power to intimidate anyone who annoyed him even slightly and didn't hesitate to shoot people with rubber bullets.

"Man, that guy was scary..."

"Yeah, talking with him shaved a few years off my life."

"Yeah, you complain even a little around him and he snaps. What an asshole."

"Tell me about it. All we did was try to make pitfalls for him to fall into, or rip holes in his swimsuit. They were just harmless pranks, but he went ballistic on us."

"I just tried to feed him some rotten fish and he blasted me with electricity so strong it sent me flying across town. I can't believe he has such a short temper!"

Hajime had taught them how terrifying he could be, but the guys were trying to overcome their fear of him by insulting him. None of them realized the women of Erisen were all giving them disgusted looks. Nor did they realize a certain young girl had overheard them either.

"Are you guys talking about Daddy?"

"Whoaaa!?"

"Myu-chan!? How long have you been listening!?"

The guys all jumped in surprise. Myu looked up at the men with an innocent smile, the same smile that had charmed all of Erisen. But despite how cute she looked, there was something terrifying about her expression.

"What were you saying about Daddy?" Myu asked again, and the men hesitated. Of course, none of them would dare insult Hajime in front of Myu. But they didn't want to praise the man who'd stolen their beloved Remia, either.

They tried to come up with a way to change the subject, but before they could, Myu said, "Oh, I know! You were talking about that time you tried to fight Daddy, but he sent you flying without even looking at you! That was super funny!"

"Gah!"

The man who'd been sent flying clutched his chest, his pride in tatters.

"Huh? You weren't talking about that? Oh, I know then! You were talking about the time you tried to play a mean prank on Daddy and

got sent flying, right? That was funny too! Even Mommy laughed at you guys! She said you were ‘pitiful!’”

“Bwagh!?”

“Eeeeeeeek!”

The guys who’d tried to prank Hajime clutched their chests as well. Still smiling, Myu continued gunning down the dagon youths. The men whose pride hadn’t been shredded yet slowly backed away, cold sweat pouring down their back. But Myu had no intention of letting her prey escape. She took a few steps forward, and the men started trembling. Her beloved Daddy had taught her to show no mercy to her enemies.

“Hmmm, but what does ‘pitiful’ mean?”

Myu cocked her head quizzically, then looked around at the men she’d either downed or chased to a corner of the pier. After seeing them all tremble in fear she nodded to herself with a smile.

“I got it! It means you’re pathetic, like Uncle!”

The word “pathetic” echoed in the men’s minds over and over. Anyone left standing slumped to the ground, defeated. All of the men looked crushed. A four-year-old girl had just called them pathetic. Little wonder their spirits had been shattered.

Myu walked over to the collapsed men and poked them with her finger. Hajime had taught her not to let her guard down until she was certain her foes had been destroyed.

“No reaction. Just like a corpse!”

Still smiling, Myu turned on her heel and trotted off. All that was left on the pier was a heap of corpses and the pleasant sea breeze. Though the onlooking women didn’t sympathize with the men in the slightest, they couldn’t help but shiver slightly. Before she’d been kidnapped, Myu had been a rather spoiled girl, one who cried easily and got lonely often. But now she’d emotionally destroyed a group of grown men. She sure had grown.

As Myu ran back home, people on the street called out to her.

“Yo, Myu-chan! You sure are energetic today!” “Hey Myu-chan, want some candy?” “Ah, Myu! Don’t run, it’s dangerous!”

All of them were kind to her in their own way. While Myu didn’t slow down, she did make sure to respond to everyone who greeted her. Manners were important, after all.

Like with all other beastmen, the dagon community was tight-knit. Everyone loved all of Erisen’s children like they were their own. However, Myu was showered with even more affection than the other kids. Part of the reason was that she’d suffered quite a traumatic experience after she’d been kidnapped, but the main reason was that Myu was just a friendly child. She was always smiling at other people, and despite her tendency to cry easily, she was surprisingly strong.

She had a natural knack for attracting people. The sun had nearly set by the time Myu returned home, and she could smell dinner.

“I’m back!”

“My, welcome home, Myu. Did you go to the pier again today?” Remia asked Myu with a smile.

Myu nodded, then tottered over to the counter and craned her head to see what was on the plates. It appeared today’s dinner was salad, soup, and meat skewers. Her eyes sparkled as she took in the feast that awaited.

“I still have to grill the meat, but do you want to eat now?”

“We can’t do that Mommy. I need to take a bath first.”

“My, is that so?”

Myu nodded with a serious face, and Remia chuckled.

“You really like baths, don’t you, Myu?”

“Baths are the greatest invention of mankind!”

“Ufufufu. I see.”

Considering how many big words Myu had just used, Remia had no doubt that was one of “Daddy’s” pet sayings. Incidentally, dragons rarely ever took baths. They were more accustomed to showers. Since their bodies were adapted to swimming in the ocean, they didn’t mind cold temperatures. While warmer water might feel a little better, the marginal benefits weren’t worth the time and effort. However, Remia’s house contained a bath. The genius Synergist Hajime had built one for his beloved daughter. The bath was a high-tech one that filled with warm water in less than a minute.

Mother and daughter took off their clothes and entered the bathtub. The warm water healed the pair, washing away the exhaustion of the day. Remia sighed in contentment as she let her body soak. Had any of Remia’s admirers seen her then, they would no doubt have gotten a nosebleed. On the other hand, Myu excitedly jumped into the bathtub and splashed around.

“Whew, that hits the spot!”

“Oh my...”

Remia did not doubt that rather old-fashioned turn of phrase was something Myu had picked up from Hajime as well. The way Myu lounged in the bath was reminiscent of how old men relaxed as well, and though Remia tried to teach her daughter better bath manners, she didn’t have much success. Once the duo was finished with their bath, Myu ran over to the fridge Hajime had transmuted for them and grabbed a bottle of milk. Naturally, she spread her legs apart and downed the bottle in one go, as was customary. By the time she was done, she had a tiny milk mustache on her face.

“Pwah! This is what I live for!”

“Oh my, this might be quite a problem.”

It appeared Myu had picked up a ton of bad habits from Hajime. Remia's smile grew stern, but she decided to save lecturing her daughter for after dinner. She finished grilling the meat as her daughter waited impatiently for dinner. Since today's dinner was meat skewers, the meat *had* to be put on the skewer before Myu was willing to eat it. Once Remia had skewered the meat to Myu's satisfaction, the little girl started eating like a starved wolf.

"Skewers after a bath are one of life's greatest joys!"

Remia's smile grew stern again. She would need to have a word with Hajime when he returned. While she may have approved of Hajime, she did not approve of the habits he was teaching her daughter.

But for Myu, this nightly ritual was her way of remembering. Remembering the day Hajime had saved her from those cruel slavers, and the day she'd experienced this warmth for the first time. She'd never forget that for the rest of her life. Nor would she forget the strength and kindness of her beloved Daddy and her beloved oneechans.



Chapter II: Arifureta Magic Academy Compilation

Arifureta Magic Academy I: Special After School Lessons

A blazing sunset shone its orange rays into a hallway. The dying light of the sun cast long shadows everywhere it touched. In this dim twilight that brought about feelings of sorrow, security, and just a hint of mystery, the inside of the school was quiet, devoid of people. Only the faint sounds of sports club members practicing outside could still be heard.

All of the classroom doors lining the hallway were closed. This peaceful school was actually a magic academy, located in a certain country of a certain parallel world. Unlike most, it wasn't restricted to only nobles, and opened its doors to commoners and even beastmen. So long as one could pass the entrance exam, they would be accepted. Thus, this school had become this world's largest magic academy.

Inside what should have been an empty classroom in this massive school were two figures. One was a young boy with white hair and an eyepatch. He was gripping his pen tightly as he looked down at his desk, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. He appeared terribly nervous, like he was facing down a ferocious beast and trying to find an opening with which to escape in.

"H-Hey, Sensei. I've finished the assignment you gave me, so can I go home now?" The white haired student, Hajime Nagumo, explained to the source of his stress that he'd finished his supplementary lessons.

"Hmm, nope. You're not done yet." Though she spoke little, the teacher's voice had a surprising amount of force behind it. And though she was his instructor, she looked young enough to be a student. Everything about her, from her appearance to her actions, had a subtle layer of seductiveness to it.

In truth, she was a three-hundred-year old vampire who was older than most adults. Her blouse had a very low cut, and her eyes seemed to be inviting you behind the wire-thin glasses she was wearing. To make matters worse, the way she kept crossing and uncrossing her stocking-clad legs was just too alluring. The effect was further multiplied by her perfect figure, golden-blond hair, and ruby-red eyes.

“Wait, why not? I finished my assignment, even though it made no sense, so hurry up and let me go home.” Hajime thrust his finished assignment paper in front of Yue. Every single question was filled out. However, it was the questions themselves that were rather questionable. For example:

- 1.) What kind of girl is your type?
- 2.) What do you think of older women?
- 3.) Do you believe forbidden love can ever work out?

The questions went on along those lines. None of them seemed in any way related to a magic curriculum. It was obvious this teacher was only interested in seducing the poor male student sitting before her.

“No. I need to check your answers first.”

“Aren’t I the only one that’d be able to tell if they’re right or not? I mean, it’s not like I lied about my answers.”

“I’m just going to make sure... by examining your body.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait just a minute. Control yourself, you sex-starved teacher.”

Yue straddled Hajime and began licking him all over. Her lust was truly insatiable. She lifted her skirt up just a little, so Hajime could catch a glimpse of what lay beneath. That, combined with the soft sensation of her body resting on his knees, her slender arms caressing the back of his neck, and her sweet scent... all started to overwhelm his rationality.

Seconds before Hajime resigned himself to entering an illicit relationship with his teacher, they were interrupted.

“The hero arrives! Stop right there, Yue-sensei! I won’t allow you to break the Hajime Nagumo anti-monopoly law!” With a thunderous bang, Shea Haulia, another student, flung open the poor classroom door with enough force to break it. Hajime was about to protest this law he’d never even heard of, but Yue pushed his head into her breasts and responded to Shea’s words instead.

“Laws were made to be broken.” And so, Hajime’s protest died in his throat. Instead, he just enjoyed the sensation of being smothered between Yue’s breasts.

“Nnngh, stubborn as always, I see! Then I suppose I’ll have to do things the hard way! Body strengthening, full power! I’ll take Hajime back by force if I have to!”

“Hmph. Bad kids need to be punished. Prepare to be banished to the counselor’s realm.”

“As if you’re one to talk! I’ll get you fired for daring to lay a hand on one of your students!”

A moment of tense silence passed between them. The school’s scholarship student and the strongest body strengthener on campus

was about to face off against the most renowned magic teacher in the entire academy. The pressure exerted by both of them was enough to make the peaceful classroom feel like hell.

Realizing he had to do something soon or there would be a bloodbath, Hajime disentangled himself from Yue's boobs. However, despite his effort, Yue simply squeezed her thighs around him and pushed her chest back into his face. Hajime felt his mind go blank. He was useless in this state. Yue stuck one hand out, while Shea settled into a martial arts stance. It seemed like a clash between these two was inevitable. And yet, just before they started fighting—

Whoosh. Countless crosses made of light assaulted the two of them. Yue and Shea instantly switched their focus, ready to beat this surprise attack off with magic and fists, but the moment they switched their attention, chains of light wound their way up Hajime's and Yue's legs. The chains forcefully separated the two from each other. Yue was flung carelessly to the side, while Hajime was carefully carried over to the classroom door.

"Hajime-kun, are you alright?" Released from Yue's enticing embrace, Hajime once again found himself enveloped in something soft the moment he was released from the chains.

A different kind of sweet scent entered his nostrils, and when he looked up he found a familiar student smiling kindly down at him. Kaori Shirasaki. Hajime opened his mouth to say something, but he was once again interrupted.

"Aahn. H-Hajime-kun, that tickles." Kaori blushed and tried to squirm into a more comfortable position.

Then let me go, Hajime thought, but then chains of light wrapped around them both and he realized Kaori had no intention of ever letting him go. She hadn't come here to save him, just to steal him away from the others.

"I see. You've got guts, Kaori. I'll send you to the counselor's realm too, so you'd better be ready to make friends with Shea."

"Don't you think a teacher who would assault her own students needs more counseling than us?"

"Let's cut the pointless chatter. I'll defeat the both of you, and then claim my prize."

Vast amounts of mana started swirling around the three most beautiful girls in school as they stared each other down. Pillars of golden, sapphire, and white light rose up so high that they passed through the school's ceiling and ascended to the heavens.

Then, with a thunderous noise, a section of the school building was destroyed. The sounds of battle rang out across the grounds. The few students still at school stopped what they were doing for an instant, but when they saw what colors the pillars of light were they

just said “At it again, huh?” and resumed whatever club activities they were indulging in.

A few minutes and many explosions later, the young boy managed to stop the trio from fighting. There was a bright crimson spark, and the school building was restored to the way it had been before. Those who attended this academy were already used to this happening. Among the many magic academies that existed in this world, this was just another normal day for one of them.

Arifureta Magic Academy II: War in the Chairwoman’s Office

“Eighty-six destroyed desks and chairs. One hundred-and-thirty-seven shattered windows. Eight classrooms with their roofs blown off. Seven more with crumbling walls or destroyed floors. A total of one hundred-and-ninety-nine other destroyed objects... Well, what do you have to say for yourselves?”

The chairwoman of this magic school, Tio Klarus, rested her elbows on the thick wooden desk. Her golden eyes glowed ominously as she stared down at the arrivals, her fingers interlaced in front of her face. The dim light of the setting sun illuminated the room.

Sitting opposite her were the school’s problem children and problem teacher, Professor Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Hajime. The three girls wrecked the school four to five times each week in their pitched battles for Hajime. They’d been called into the chairwoman’s office today for the same reason. Sadly, it was clear that calling them to the office every time they destroyed the school had done nothing to rectify their rowdy behavior. In fact, even now they showed no remorse.

“How unfortunate. It’s clear to me the builders cut corners in their work. You should sue whoever you contracted for the construction job.”

“This is all your fault, Yue-sensei, Kaori-san. I only break things Hajime-san can fix!”

“That’s not what’s important here. I demand that you fire Yue-sensei at once. A teacher that would dare to make advances on her student cannot be allowed to teach here!”

It was obvious they hadn’t reflected on their actions. Professor Yue was ready to sue over the destruction she herself had caused, Shea was convinced she was the only one exempt from punishment because she’d been slightly more considerate, while Kaori had boldly stated the school’s destruction “wasn’t important.” A vein bulged on Tio’s forehead.

“You brats! Will you not reflect on your actions even a little? Yue-

sensei, I cannot believe even you would stoop this low. You are a teacher! You are supposed to guide the students and set an example, yet here I find you inciting this delinquent behavior!”

“I incited nothing. I was simply swatting away the flies buzzing around my Hajime. It’s not my fault the buildings were too weak to handle that.”

“What do you mean, not your fault!? In the first place—”

“I’m not a fly! If anything, you’re the fly, Yue-sensei!”

“Could you please not refer to him as ‘my’ Hajime? Please? Or I’ll have to shut your mouth for good.”

“That’s enough out of all of you! I am the chairwoman! The person running this school! I will not be ignored!” However, no matter what she said, Professor Yue and the two students ignored the chairwoman. Realizing her words would never get through to them, Tio sighed and turned to Hajime. He had so far been ignoring the proceedings and was staring wistfully at the sunset.

“Mas— I mean, Hajime. This involves you too, you know? The reason these girls are fighting is because of you.”

“There’s nothing I can do about that, Chairwoman. I already told them all, you know? The only one I love is Yue-sensei, so there’s no reason for all this pointless fighting. And yet...”

Hajime looked over at his companions. Yue was blushing happily, while Shea’s bunny ears were pressed flat against her head, and Kaori had stuck her fingers in her ears. There seemed to be some kind of evil specter rising behind Kaori as she glared hatefully at Yue. Tio sighed again. She had assigned all three of them a hundred written apologies to be handed in by the next day, hoping that spartan punishments would work where lectures had failed. Yue and the others complained of course, but when Tio threatened further disciplinary action, including expulsion, they reluctantly relented and agreed to write the apologies. Finally, they were released from their lecture and turned to go home.

“Mas— I mean, Hajime. Could you stay behind? I know you repair the school each time, but a few problems have started to occur.”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure I restored it perfectly...”

“You did indeed. Your Transmutation skills truly are impressive. However, there are times things aren’t simply destroyed, but completely obliterated. I was hoping to talk to you about that.”

“Well, I’ll hear you out at least.” Tio nodded in satisfaction. Suddenly, chills ran down her spine. She looked over and saw Professor Yue, Shea, and Kaori all glaring daggers at her from the doorway.

“Wh-What is it, you three? I have nothing more to say to you, go home! You have your apologies to be writing! No skipping class to

write them, either! Now go home and get to work!” Tio walked out from behind her desk and pushed the three of them out of their room. They didn’t stop glaring at her, but they couldn’t argue with her logic. Tio slammed the door shut behind them once they were out.

“My my, those three really are a handful. Now then, Hajime, take a seat on that sofa over there.”

Hajime eased himself into the nearby leather sofa. Tio casually sat down next to him, almost as if it was the natural thing to do. She purposely pulled back her kimono and crossed her legs, revealing her plump thighs. At the same time, she loosened her collar, giving an obviously transparent excuse.

“I worked up a sweat with all that yelling.”

“So, what did you want to talk about, Chairwoman?”

“There is no need to stand on ceremony. Just call me Tio.”

“So, what did you want to talk about, Chairwoman?”

“I’m being ignored again... Haaah... Haaah... Ahem... Where was I... Oh, yes. Earlier, Mas— Ahem... I mean, Hajime, you beat me to a pulp, kicked me about like I was trash, and then did unspeakable things to my arse.”

“Hey, Chairwoman. I can’t deny it since it’s the truth, but you don’t have to put it like that, do you? You’re making me out to be some kind of terrible thug. Not only had I never seen you in your dragon form before, but you’re the one who got carried away and said you wanted to see my full strength, remember?”

Some time ago, Hajime had gone up to the mine in the mountains in order to gather materials to transmute. There, he’d encountered the chairwoman in her transformed state. Tio had just felt like going out for a short flight to relax a little, but when she saw Hajime she decided to test his skills. She’d been hearing lots of rumors about him, and wanted to see how powerful this student really was. As a result, Hajime had, without hesitation, mercilessly set about destroying Tio as efficiently as possible. By the time she’d reverted to her original form, she’d already suffered an attack that had changed her forever.

“I-I do. For that, I am sorry. Still, that does not excuse sticking such a b-big, thick, thing up my arse.”

“What’d you expect? Your scales were too tough to pierce, so striking your weak point was the obvious solution.”

“However, you did not stop even after I revealed who I was to you. You continued drilling that... thing inside me. Thanks to that, my precious backside was damaged beyond repair.” Tio sidled closer to Hajime with tears in her eyes. One hand was tenderly rubbing her butt. Though he’d done it only to get answers out of her, Hajime had to admit he may have gone too far. Seeing him at a loss for words, Tio saw her chance and scooted even closer to him.

“Ever since then my arse has felt strange. You have to take responsibility for this.”

“R-Responsibility?”

“Yes. Take responsibility... and violate my arse once more!”

Chairwoman Tio leaped at Hajime after letting out those words. Her eyes had gone from teary to bloodshot in the span of a few seconds. Hajime reflexively slapped her away, which made Tio let out an enraptured moan as she was flung back.

Crap, now I've really done it, Hajime thought, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. Then, he caught sight of Tio's expression as she cupped her cheek, and his worries vanished. They were replaced by an intense feeling of contempt. He glared down at Tio, but that only made her tremble in pleasure.

“M-Master, thank you so much for that wonderful reward... Haaah... Haaah...”

“I'm not spending another second with you, you pervert! I'm going home!” Hajime bolted for the door. However, Tio crawled after him in a rather disturbing manner with surprising speed. She caught Hajime's leg and clung to it for dear life.

“Master! More, please!”

“I'm not your master, you damn pervert! I can't believe you lectured Yue-sensei when you're like this! You're worse than all of them! Gah, let me go! Quit clinging to me!” Hajime's fight with the chairwoman had opened a forbidden door. Tio clung to Hajime with all the strength of a dragonman, savoring every insult Hajime threw at her.

Maybe I should just beat her up so bad that she can't stand, then dump her on the mountain somewhere. As always, Hajime had no mercy.

“Get off of Hajime, you perverted chairwoman.” The wallpaper peeled away, revealing Yue, who'd been standing behind it.

“I thought something like this might happen! I can't ever let my guard down around you!” Shea dropped down from the ceiling.

“Did you really think you could fool me? Did you?” Kaori slid out from under the sofa.

“What is this!?” Tio screamed in shock.

“You're safe now that I'm here,” the three girls said in unison.

“The three of you are just as scary,” Hajime replied bluntly. He loved Yue, but this was still a little much.

“I could have sworn the three of you had left... but it seems you just hid your presences. I was careless! However, I shall not let anyone interfere with my time with Master, not even you three! Draconify!”

“Hmph. That's my line. Tonight, I'll be making dragon steak for dinner— Draconic Thunder!”

“I can't believe you spent so long lecturing us only to try and steal

Hajime-san for yourself... Today's the day you die! Drucken, standby! I'm gonna blow you to the moon!"

"Wait for me, Hajime-kun. I'll do my best to stop them! I promise I'll capture them all for you!"

The chairwoman's room was destroyed that day. Students and teachers alike watched as a jet-black dragon did battle with a crackling golden dragon. In the middle of it all, a bunny-eared girl sent the black dragon flying with a blow from her warhammer. Then, both the vampire professor and the bunny girl were bound by ethereal chains that flung them to the ends of the earth. The fierce battle raged on for several hours. Once it was finally over, a good forty percent of the school was in ruins.

"Maybe I should run away with Yue-sensei and hide somewhere deep in the countryside," Hajime muttered to himself, as he wearily set about repairing the academy. Those who heard him replied in a simple, heartfelt manner.

"Yes, please!"

Arifureta Magic Academy III: Sports Meet of Depravity

In a faraway land, there was a magic academy that was considered the best in the world. It boasted a massive courtyard, which was about as large as the Tokyo Dome, for its students to train in. Normally it was a rather dreary place, but today it was filled with decorations and ornaments. Furthermore, it was filled to the brim with students, their families, and simple observers. For today was the annual sports meet.

The students had spent the past few months polishing their skills, all for the sake of carrying their team to victory. The morning events had already finished, and after a short break the afternoon events would commence. The reason everyone put such importance on this event was because if one did well, it was possible nobles from various countries would want to scout them for high-ranking positions. However, while most students were pumped up for this event, there was one girl in the broadcaster's booth who looked dispirited.

"Shizuku can't take this anymore. Shizuku's going home..."

"P-President!? Why're you talking like a kid!? Get ahold of yourself!"

Slumped across the broadcaster's desk was the student council president, Shizuku Yaegashi. She was so depressed that even her ponytail was drooping. Next to her was a special guest who'd been invited to the sports meet, Liliana, the kingdom's princess.

"Hehehe, I'm fine, Liliana-sama. I just died a little inside when I realized there's still half a day of this hell left."

“Then you’re not fine at all, are you!? Your eyes look like a dead fish’s...”

Shizuku looked up at Liliana. It looked like she’d aged a decade over the past few days. Liliana couldn’t hide her worry, but before she could say anything more, the bell signaling the start of afternoon events rang. Shizuku’s expression returned to the stoic mask of the student council president. She flipped the switch on the magic amplifier and began her speech.

“This is the management committee speaking. The afternoon games will begin shortly. I hope you’re all rested and ready for the final round of events. Let’s give it our all until the very end... Lastly, I would like to implore everyone to please, *please* follow the rules, and play safe.”

Cheers rang out throughout the grounds. It seemed her desperate pleas for certain students to play nice had been well received. The rest of the student body was tired of all the collateral damage they’d been suffering.

Finally, it was time to start the first event of the afternoon, the obstacle course. Participants would have to overcome the physical and magical obstacles in their way using a combination of their athletic talents and their magical abilities. The first team to reach the flag at the end would be the winner.

For some reason, though, the pedestal where the flag was supposed to be was covered by a huge cloth. Shizuku’s expression stiffened. She had a bad feeling about this. A teacher walked up to the pedestal with tears in his eyes, and reluctantly pulled the cloth off. The crowd fell silent when they saw what lay underneath.

“Mmmmmm. Mmmmmm. Mga!”

Instead of a flag, there was a chair on the pedestal. And sitting on it, tied and gagged, was Hajime. He was struggling desperately against his bonds, but to no avail. It was rather pitiful, really. Hajime was probably the best Synergist on campus, and whoever had captured him had taken that into account. His chair was made of the sturdiest wood, and the ropes tying him of the toughest ivy. There was no metal or ore he could transmute within reach.

“H-Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey! What do you think you’re doing!? Why on earth is Nagumo-kun tied up here!? Kudeta-sensei! You’re a teacher, aren’t you!? Hey, look at me! Tell me what’s going on!”

“I-I don’t know! I have nothing to do with this! Yue-sensei just told me if I didn’t do as she said that she’d... err, well...”

Kudeta was known as an upright and thoughtful teacher, which made him very popular with the kids. However, he was trembling in fear at present. After a few seconds of dithering, he dashed off the

courtyard as fast as his legs would carry him.

“Tch, he got away. Fine, we’ll just have to handle it ourselves. Someone! Anyone! Untie that student—” Loud music drowned Shizuku out before she could finish. It was an upbeat rock number, one that got everyone’s blood pumping. Confused, Shizuku turned to look at the music control tent. But before she could get a grasp of the situation, the girls entered the stage.

“Let’s settle everything once and for all here on this grand stage. Hajime’s mine, I won’t hand him over to anyone, no matter what obstacles present themselves.”

Yue, the strongest and prettiest magician in the school, strode onto the courtyard first, her white lab coat and golden-blond hair glimmering in the sunlight. Following behind her were a hundred members of the “I want Yue-sensei to give me private lessons after school” club.

“I’ll obliterate any obstacles that get between me and my love. Whether they’re a teacher or a friend, I won’t show any mercy. I’ll drown this field in a sea of blood if I have to!”

Shea stepped onto the courtyard next, swinging her trusty warhammer from side to side. If Yue was the academy’s strongest magician, then Shea was their strongest melee fighter. Not only that, she was revered as an idol by students and teachers alike. Following behind her were a hundred members of the “I want Shea-tan to step on me” club.

“Hajime-kun is mine and mine alone. I’ll seal away any obstacles that try to come between us.”

Kaori stepped onto the courtyard next. She was dressed in a nun’s habit that only showed off the barest hints of her tantalizing legs. She was known as the school’s gentlest healer, but right now her gaze was as cold as ice. Following behind her were a hundred members of the “I want to be healed by Kaori-chan” club.

“My goodness, I cannot believe these youngsters are doing whatever they want on my campus. Know that none who’ve dared to stand against me have survived the encounter. This love nest belongs only to me and my mast— Hajime. All obstacles will be removed.”

Tio’s golden pupils flashed dangerously. She was the last to step onto the courtyard. She was the respected dragon princess who reigned as the chairwoman of this school, and also a raging masochist. Following behind her were a hundred members of the “Dragon Princess Bodyguard” club. Sadly, they were unaware of her hidden perverted side.

After glaring at each other for a few seconds, the girls all simultaneously said:

“I’ll be the one to remove all obstacles in the way of my love!”

“Stop right thereeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! What the hell are you guys doing!? You’re not even entered in this event! Besides, teachers and administrators aren’t even allowed to participate! And just because you guys keep using the word obstacles doesn’t automatically make what you’re doing an obstacle course! What kind of battle are you trying to hold here!? Get off the stage and get back to the stands, you idiots! I’ve had enough of you!” Shizuku was panting by the end of the tirade.

“Wow, to think the student council president can argue on equal footing with those four. She really is amazing,” Liliana exclaimed.

Unfortunately, the four of them completely ignored Shizuku and went ahead with their competition anyway. The student council couldn’t hope to match the authority of the chairwoman, so it wasn’t like Shizuku ever had a chance.

The “obstacle course” that followed was one that had never before been seen in history. Shizuku lost a few years off her life from that event alone.

“Heeey! Quit sending lightning dragons into the stands! Chairwoman, you can’t transform here! Hey, don’t use your breath! Kaori, stop using the teachers as catapults. Just because you’re healing them right after doesn’t make it right! Shea, just because Kaori can heal everyone doesn’t give you the right to knock people around like pinballs! Oh no, one of the teachers got thrown right into the pope’s stand! I’m terribly sorry for how unruly the students are being!”

Shizuku kept yelling until her voice grew hoarse. She was respected by the entire student body, and known as the academy’s strongest swordswoman, but there was one other nickname the school knew her by.

“The school’s most pitiful student council president.”

“You braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaats! Cut it out, before I cut you all down!” The student council president’s angry screams had become a regular fixture of this academy.

Arifureta Magic Academy IV: Elections of Sorrow

“I can’t take it anymore. I quit. Someone else can be student council president.”

Despite how softly it was said, the words carried across the student council room.

The other student council members and its advisor all stiffened. An unnatural silence followed that proclamation. Urged by the piercing stares of his fellow council members, vice-president Kouki Amanogawa hesitantly called out to the president.

“Sh-Shizuku? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Shizuku's face was hidden by her bangs, and her expression was unreadable.

"You want to know if something happened?"

Kouki quailed at the thunderous tone of her voice. The secretary, Eri Nakamura, accountant, Suzu Taniguchi, and advisor, Aiko Hatayama, all flinched as well. Shizuku merely indicated the stack of documents on her desk.

"Why don't you tell me what *didn't* happen. This stack of papers is all complaints people have lodged against the academy. No other student council president in the history of this academy has ever had to deal with so many. Now *this* stack of papers is all the orders to repair, replace, and strengthen school facilities that have been destroyed. That stack of papers over there is order forms for all the goods that were taken without permission during academy events and need to be replaced. Finally, that stack of papers over there is receipts for all of the events we've held. Worse, a certain teacher's and a certain student's fanclubs have grown so large that their club budget is greater than that of the sports clubs! Oh, and I almost forgot. You see this? This is a letter a student sent in. He's asking how he can steal Yue-sensei away from Nagumo. Apparently if we don't reply he's going to bomb the school. There's hundreds more like that, dozens for all of the girls surrounding Nagumo. Ufufu, I must say our students are certainly wonderful young adults, don't you agree? Fufufufufufufufufu."

Suzu and Eri shrunk back and hugged each other as Shizuku rattled off her problems one after another. Aiko fell to the ground when she heard Shizuku's deranged laughter.

"C-Calm down, Shizuku. I'm sure... I'm sure it'll be alright! We're here for you. We'll pull through this somehow—"

"Somehow!? You mean you'll make me do even more work, right!? Ufufu, Kouki you really need to get better at telling jokes... Say that again and I'll kill you."

"Hiii."

Kouki crumbled. No one could blame him. Shizuku looked ready to go off on anyone who so much as looked in her direction. The accumulated stress of managing the student council had finally caught up to her. However, Shizuku was, above all, rational. When she saw her friends flinching away from her gaze she realized she'd been unreasonable. She cleared her throat and tried to calmly—

Before she could say anything, the door slid open. The head of the public morals committee, Ryutarou Sakagami walked inside, a stack of papers in his hands.

"Hey, Shizuku. Yue-sensei and the others have blown up the school again. Here's all the complaints and—"

“I’ll kill them.”

With that ominous proclamation, Shizuku picked up her katana and stomped over to the door. Everyone present knew she would really do it.

“S-Stop, Shizuku!”

“Calm down, Shizushizu.”

“Someone call a healer! We need someone who can heal broken hearts!”

“Sakagami-kun! Defend that doorway like your life depends on it! We can’t let Yaegashi-san get out while she’s like this.”

Kouki tried to pin Shizuku’s arms behind her back while Suzu and Eri held her back. Aiko hung on to Shizuku’s sword arm for dear life. Sweating profusely, Ryutarou prepared to give his life to stop the student council president.

“Hmph, let me go. Let me go, I said. I won’t be satisfied until I’ve killed them at least once! They need to taste my pain!”

“You can’t even kill someone more than once! Besides, they’ll be dead so they won’t be able to taste your pain!”

Kouki was absolutely correct. However, Shizuku really was at her limit now. Taking care of Yue and the others’ fights, then taking care of the riots each girl’s respective fan club caused after those fights had left her utterly exhausted. Sounds of fighting filled the student council room for a while. Finally the dust settled, and Shizuku remained standing amidst a sea of corpses. With her enemies defeated, Shizuku declared, “Student council president elections are now open.”

Translation: “I’m sick and tired of dealing with this! Someone else can handle these problems now!”

Kouki tried to convince her out of it, but Shizuku refused to listen. In the span of a few days, she’d already set up the special elections to decide the next president. It was times like this where her unparalleled organizational skills shone. The candidates for the next student council president were as followed:

Candidate 1 — Yue “If I am elected president, I promise to make a room all students can use to have sex in.”

Needless to say, the students’ expressions stiffened when they learned a teacher of all people was running for *student* council president.

Candidate 2 — Shea Haulia “I want to make a government of the rabbit ears, for the rabbit ears, by the rabbit ears! In other words, turn the government into me and Hajime-san’s love nest!”

Needless to say, the students all retorted that no one would vote for someone who was clearly planning on using the student council for her own gain.

Candidate 3 — Kaori Shirasaki “I-I’ll do my best in Shizuku-chan’s

place! I promise to open up a suggestion box where everyone can bring me their opinions and requests. I know with Hajime-kun's help the two of us will be able to make the academy a better place!"

It seemed Kaori was planning on having only Hajime in her student council. Needless to say, the students all sighed as they could easily tell what she was really after.

Candidate 4 — Perverted Dragon Chairwoman "If I am elected, I will make Mas— Ahem, I mean Hajime Nagumo the student council president! After that, I will utilize my powers as chairwoman to turn the student council room into my office! No one is allowed to— Ah, hey! Stop throwing things at me! Wh-Who did that!? And who's firing advanced-level magic at me!?"

Needless to say, the students all hurled insults at her.

"Go back to your cave, you perverted dragon!"

And needless to say, Tio found said insults highly arousing.

In the end, the election resulted in Shizuku Yaegashi being chosen to serve for another term. Because of the special election rules she herself had set up, she had no right to refuse the appointment. When Shizuku saw the results, she threw a tantrum.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. That does it, I'm dropping ouuuuuuuuuuuuuut!"

After her infantile outburst, she tried to flee the school.

"Th-The president's trying to run away! Everyone, chase after her!"

"Without her, this school's doomed! Capture the president, for the sake of our future!"

"Guys, surround her! We've gotta make sure she can't escape!"

"This is an announcement for all little sisters of this school! Launch the onee-sama disciplinary squad! There will be a prize waiting for the one who can console her! Furthermore, you are permitted to take advantage of the chaos and touch her."

Needless to say, the entire student body chased after Shizuku. Their fervor was surely a sign of how much the students loved her.

However, despite her childlike tantrums, Shizuku was still a crafty woman. She continued to evade her pursuers for a good three days and three nights. Finally, after a concentrated effort combining the entire talents of the student body, they captured her. Her great escape was so impressive that leaders of other countries applauded her skills. Unfortunately, that also meant her status as student council president was set in stone.

"I swear, I'll kill you all someday," Shizuku Yaegashi muttered to herself as she nursed a headache and started working through today's pile of paperwork. She truly was this academy's hardest worker.

Chapter III: Arifureta Fairy Tales Compilation

Arifureta Fairy Tales: The Honest Woodcutter

One day, a woodcutter was cutting down trees near a certain spring. He had with him his trusty magic-powered azantium chainsaw. His chainsaw made a loud buzzing noise as it cut through trees like a hot knife through butter. With his trusty chainsaw, the young man could chop down anything he pleased, whether it be boulders or steel walls. A tool like this would be just as useful on a battlefield as it was in a forest. Anyone who wielded it would be able to mow down hordes of soldiers with ease. Swords, shields, and even plate armor would be unable to withstand its might.

As for why a mere woodcutter possessed such a powerful tool, well, that was not important. Why he was still just a woodcutter despite having the ability to be far more was also not important.

With a resounding crash, one of the trees fell to the ground.

“Phew, looks like work went well today, too.”

Today’s job was done. It had only taken the young man five minutes, but he still wiped a bead of imaginary sweat off his brow. Just then, he sensed something trying to kill him!

“Tch, die you worthless mutt!”

He let loose a string of violent curses that one wouldn’t expect to hear from a village woodcutter. The young man then pulled loose an L-shaped piece of metal from his pocket and took aim. A second later, a streak of red light was set loose through the trees. There sure were a lot of things being set loose today.

The last thing to come loose was the head of the “mutt” he’d shot at, a wolf-like monster that had been hiding in a nearby thicket. The moment the streak of light hit its head, it blew clean off. Still, there wasn’t just one wolf aiming for the young man’s life. He fired off a series of flashes that brutally obliterated the entire pack. The scene was gruesome enough that it should have been censored. The peaceful forest was dyed red with the blood of monsters.

“Tch, as always, all you’ve got on your side is numbers. Hm? Shit, the goods!”

Until now, the young devil who’d been painting the forest red had been perfectly composed. However, he lost his cool when he noticed

one of the wolves sneaking up to his precious goods.

By goods, he of course meant the splendid tree he'd just chopped down. The monster then heartlessly activated its special magic and shot a fireball at the tree. Even if the woodcutter slaughtered the monster now, his tree would be burnt beyond recognition. The woodcutter flung his L-shaped weapon to the side, raised his chainsaw in both hands, and charged toward the fireball.

"Like hell I'll let you!"

With a spirited cry, the woodcutter swung his chainsaw down and split the fireball in two. He then swung it back up, slicing right through the wolf's stomach. Another red flower blossomed amidst the green trees.

"Phew, I made it... Oh yeah..."

Once again wiping an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow, the woodcutter looked about for the weapon he'd thrown earlier. When his gaze passed over the spring, he noticed there were ripples in the previously still water.

"Crap! I can't believe I threw it right into the spring!"

The woodcutter walked over to the edge of the spring. Seeing as he couldn't find his weapon anywhere else, it was likely it had fallen in. He slumped his shoulders and sighed.

"Man, what do I do? Without that, it'll take more time to annihilate monsters and thieves. God, what a pain."

The spring was both wide and deep. Diving to the bottom to search for his weapon would take considerable time and effort.

"Maybe I should just throw a bunch of burning taur down there and vaporize the spring."

The woodcutter muttered ominously. Taur burned at an impressive 3000 degrees Celsius, so it would certainly be possible. The spring suddenly began to sparkle, as if reacting to the woodcutter's terrifying remarks. Surprised, the man turned on his chainsaw and got ready to fight. From within the spring's depths, a person emerged.

"Wow..."

The usually curt and cruel woodcutter gasped in wonder. That was just how beautiful the goddess who had emerged from the spring was. Nothing could match her splendor. Her golden-blond hair sparkled in the sunlight. Her long eyelashes and deep crimson eyes captivated all who gazed upon her. Her porcelain-white skin was tinged with the faintest of blushes. She appeared to be no more than twelve or thirteen years old, but her passionate gaze and seductive smile made her seem much older. She was quite the captivating goddess. Her slender limbs peeked out from a pure white gown. When she spotted the woodcutter, the goddess crouched down in front of him. She then thrust both hands into the spring and pulled something

out with each. The woodcutter had expected her to use magic, not something as mundane as her own two hands.

“Is this your crafty rabbit? Or is this your perverted priestess?”

The woodcutter didn’t know how to respond. The goddess had just pulled two people out of the spring. One had bunny ears growing out of her head, while the other was dressed in priestess robes. They were both soaked through and seemed rather miffed at being held up by their collars.

From the sound of it, the goddess had plunged them into the spring against their will. It seemed this was a goddess who kidnapped people.

“Ugh. Hey, you, mister with the chainsaw. Won’t you please pick this poor rabbit? If you do, I’ll devote these bunny ears to you for life!”

The woodcutter wasn’t quite sure what it meant to have bunny ears devoted to him, but he certainly was tempted. The bunny girl had an impressive bust size, and she made sure to emphasize it while pleading to the young man.

I see now, she definitely is crafty.

“U-Umm, you over there! The guy who turned this peaceful forest into a battlefield, I mean. Do you think you could help me? If you pick me, I’ll do anything you ask!”

The woodcutter wasn’t sure what she was expecting him to ask of her, but he could tell by her blushing and fidgeting that it wasn’t anything wholesome. The priestess buried her face in her hands, but continued peeking coyly through her fingers at the woodcutter.

I see now, she’s definitely a pervert.

“I didn’t drop anything living into the spring, you know.”

“Huh!?”

The crafty bunny girl and perverted priestess looked at him in shock.

“Mmm... I suppose that’s understandable. We don’t need these, then.”

“Hey, don’t you think that’s a little rude!?”

“Y-You’re so mean, Ha—”

The goddess dumped both of them back into the spring. They didn’t come back up.

“Then, is this your—”

“Oh, is it my turn already? Very well, Master. Please insult—”

“Next.”

The goddess dropped what she picked up before the woodcutter even had a good chance to look at it. From the quick glimpse he’d gotten, he assumed it was some strange creature. The goddess stuck her hand into the spring once more and fished around. After a while,

it seemed she found what she was looking for and pulled her hand back out.

“Mmm... Is this your thirty-five centimeter long, taur-made, azantium-coated, Lightning Field-powered, six shot revolver capable of railgun-enhanced shots and named after the German word for thunder, aka Donner?”

What a frighteningly detailed description. It was hard to believe she'd seen it for the first time with how accurate it was. It was almost as if this goddess had been watching the woodcutter all this time.

The woodcutter's expression stiffened. He had realized, perhaps a little too late, that this goddess was dangerous. Chills ran down his spine, and he opened his mouth to say that it was indeed his. However, the goddess interrupted him before he could.

“Or...”

She took her empty hand and placed it elegantly on her own chest.

“Is this your goddess?”

“Like I said, I didn't drop anything living into that spring,” the woodcutter retorted, which made the goddess narrow her eyes. That was the look of a hunter eyeing her prey.

“This is your goddess, isn't it?”

Now she was pushing herself onto the woodcutter. However, he wasn't one to be swayed that easily.

“No, I dropped Donner into there. The gun you're hiding behind your back. Please give it back to me. Hey, wait, don't throw it away! What? I have to pick you if I want it back? Now you're just blackmailing me!”

The goddess attempted to throw Donner back into the spring, tears in her eyes, while the woodcutter did everything in his power to stop her. Sounds of their life and death struggle resounded throughout the woods.

In the end, their tale ended just how it was meant to according to folklore. For his honesty, the woodcutter received everything the goddess had offered him before. That, of course, meant he received both his revolver and a smiling goddess.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: Alice in Wonderland

“I'm bored...”

A voice muttered from up high in the sky. Its owner was a beautiful blonde girl in a white apron. She floated in the air, far above the lush green fields. It was a mystery as to how she was able to ignore gravity. However, one could allow her astounding beauty to explain that away. After all, anything was possible for beautiful

people.

The beautiful girl, Alice, heard something down below and looked to see what it was.

“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!”

A white rabbit-girl wearing stylish sunglasses roared down the green plains on a motorcycle. She seemed to be in a huge hurry.

What an odd sight. I suppose this might make for a good way to kill time, Alice thought to herself. It was interesting to note that she found a bunny girl on a motorcycle odd, but saw nothing strange about the fact that she could float. Alice descended upon the bunny girl, intent on capturing— No, talking to this strange creature. She seemed wholly unconcerned by the fact that the girl was in a great hurry. Alice dropped like a rock, accelerating to the speed of sound. She crashed into the ground in front of the motorcycle with the force of a meteor.

“Hiiiiiiiiiiii!?! Wh-What on earth was that!? What just happened!?”

The white rabbit-girl shrieked in surprise. She screeched to a halt, drifting her bike to improve her deceleration. Then, she strained her eyes, trying to see through the dust cloud Alice’s impact had kicked up. Eventually, the gust of wind blew the dust away, revealing a massive crater with Alice standing in its center. Unhurt. With not even a speck of dirt on her clothes.

“Ms. White Rabbit, where are you going?”

“Wait, we’re just gonna ignore that crazy entrance of yours!? I just saw something insane and you want to know where I’m going!?”

The white rabbit’s reaction was only natural. However, Alice responded with her trademark silent glare. It seemed she wouldn’t say anything else until the rabbit answered her questions.

This girl’s bad news! Intimidated by the pressure Alice was exuding, the rabbit finally relented and told Alice her destination.

“I see. So you’re headed for a parallel universe, then. Very well. They say the more the merrier. I shall accompany you.”

“No that’s really quite—”

The rabbit trailed off as she saw Alice’s death glare.

“G-Glad to have you.”

Her rabbit ears drooped. It seemed she wouldn’t be able to defy Alice. Satisfied, Alice nodded and followed the rabbit to the hole leading between worlds. The two of them leaped into it together, falling a long, long way. Growing tired of the long wait, Alice grabbed the poor rabbit by her collar and accelerated faster down the hole. Finally, they landed with a bang. Alice slapped the poor, unconscious girl awake and examined her surroundings.

“What’s this, Ms. White Rabbit?”

“Ughhhhhh...”

Alice pointed to a cookie sitting on top of a table. There was a

note next to it that read “Eat me.” Sadly, the rabbit was too busy trying not to puke to answer her question. Sighing, Alice trained her death glare on the rabbit once more, which made her snap to attention. Her face still pale, she squeezed out a reply.

“I-It makes you bigger.”

“Interesting.”

Alice’s eyes sparkled with mischief. Her gaze fixated on the rabbit’s chest, which jiggled every time she trembled. Alice greedily devoured the cookie. Sadly, all it did was make her body bigger. Annoyed, Alice groped the rabbit’s boobs. If she couldn’t have them, she’d at least enjoy them. However, their superb softness only made Alice even more jealous. Finally, she remembered what they’d come here for, and summoned a torrent of water to destroy the door. With the path now open, she headed out into this new world. Many of the nearby animals rode the torrent that suddenly appeared as well, gathering around Alice and the rabbit. They invited Alice to join their race. Alice showed off a rare smile, and accepted their invitation.

“Victory goes to the swift— Whirling Darkness.”

Alice crushed all the other contenders with a whirlpool of gravity. In order to win, she’d eliminated the competition. It was a very efficient method, albeit rather cruel. She’d won the race without having to run a foot. Furthermore, Alice had flattened the entire area. The poor white rabbit shrunk back, trying to pretend this was all just a dream. However, this was reality and Alice dragged her on to whatever lay ahead.

Along the way, Alice encountered the Jabberwocky, the manifestation of all evil in the world. As the Jabberwocky tried to stop her, she sent him packing with a well-placed crimson javelin to the behind. For some reason, this made the Jabberwocky moan in pleasure. Disturbed, Alice instead flattened the Jabberwocky with gravity magic. Once again, Alice flattened the entire area. Many other fantastical creatures tried to bar Alice’s way, but she crushed each and every one of them with gravity magic.

The entire topography of Wonderland was beginning to become uniform. Finally, the pair entered the forest. Alice sensed something above her, and looked up at the trees.

“Hello there, young lady! I’m the Cheshire Cat. Why are you here? There’s no food here that will make your chest grow bigger.”

A strange creature grinned at Alice. There were cat ears growing out of its head. Alice’s eyebrows twitched. The white rabbit groaned, guessing what was about to happen next. However, the fearless cat continued, heedless of the danger it was in.

“Hey, how did it feel? Eating something in the hopes that it would make your breasts bigger, only to find out all it did was make your

whole body bigger? How does it feel knowing no matter what you eat, your breasts are doomed to remain as flat as a washboard? Come on, tell—”

The Cheshire Cat, along with half the forest, was flattened in an instant. No one ever saw the Cheshire Cat again. Alice sullenly walked through the forest. Her irritation vanished in an instant once they reached the exit, though.

“Hm? It’s rare to see a guest here. Are you a friend of the White Rabbit’s?”

Alice was smitten at once. Her heart began to race, and her body grew hot.

“Why hello, Mr. Hatter. Are you holding another tea party today?”

“I am indeed. It’s never easy dealing with the queen. I fear I need a cup of tea before going to see her or I’ll likely end up being hauled off for insulting royalty.”

The Hatter was smartly dressed in a tailcoat, and had an eyepatch covering one eye. He smiled awkwardly and offered the pair tea. From his words, Alice could tell the queen came to visit him often. Though she claimed she was just checking up on her hat orders, as he was known as the greatest hatter in the kingdom, the white rabbit knew that was just a facade. It was obvious to anyone who’d seen them that the queen was head over heels in love with the Hatter.

“So, White Rabbit. Would you like to introduce me to that friend of yours?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, she’s not really my friend. She’s more like, how do I put this...”

The White Rabbit couldn’t decide how to introduce Alice. She was sure if she told the Hatter what Alice really was—the incarnation of violence—she wouldn’t live to see another day.

Fortunately, she was spared when Alice decided to introduce herself.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hatter. My name is Alice. I know this is a bit sudden, but... I’ve fallen in love with you at first sight. Will you marry me, Mr. Hatter?”

Time stopped for the Mad Hatter. Once again, the White Rabbit groaned. Alice trotted up to the Hatter and gave him the most pleading, puppy-dog look she could muster. At the same time, her gaze promised death if he refused. Time resumed for the Mad Hatter.

“Gladly.”

The White Rabbit’s groaning grew louder. She didn’t think the queen would sit idly by as some interloper came in and stole away her lover. War was coming. And indeed, when the Queen of Hearts finally arrived, she did not take kindly to her Hatter being in the arms of another woman. Her eyes grew red with rage, and she ordered her

card soldiers to attack Alice. However, Alice wasn't going to give up her new prize that easily.

The battle that ensued was so fierce it razed all of Wonderland to the ground. Poor White Rabbit even wrote a book about it once it was over. She titled it "Attack on Alice" and it was a bestseller.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: The Match Sellers

—The match-selling bunny girl

"Does anyone need matches? Matches for saaale!"

One harsh winter evening, a bunny girl wandered the streets selling matches. Her weak voice rang out through the snow, and her bunny ears drooped in the cold.

"Someone please buy my matches! Doesn't anyone need matches?"

She'd already spent half the day walking the streets peddling her wares. She was so numb from the cold that she could barely walk. Her cries were practically a plea for help.

"Why won't anyone lend this poor bunny girl their ear... I'm so, so cold."

The bunny girl ducked into a nearby alley, hoping to get out of the wind and snow. But the dark, dingy alley provided no succor for her frozen heart.

"*Sniffle...* At this rate, I'll freeze to death. I guess I should use one of my matches to warm me up."

The bunny girl took out one of her matches. Just as she was about to light it, she noticed someone staring at her. A white-haired boy with an eye patch was looking at her from the main street. Thinking she might finally have found a customer, the bunny girl called out to him.

"Would you like to buy a match!?"

The boy looked at her as if he were staring at some strange creature and said, "Aren't you cold? You're shivering."

Of course I'm cold! I'm freezing to death here! So buy my freaking matches! The bunny girl once again tried to sell her wares to the boy.

"How about you put on some clothes?"

Indeed, despite the fact that it was the dead of winter, the bunny girl was dressed in a very skimpy outfit. That outfit was the main reason most of the villagers avoided her.

The scantily-clad bunny girl's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"How did I never realize!"

I can just wear more layers! Her ears shot up.

—The match-selling perverted dragon

It was evening, in the dead of winter. A beautiful older woman shuffled down the street, carrying a basket full of matches.

“Ugh, I was unable to sell any matches today as well.”

She hung her head, and a few people spared her pitying glances.

“It’s far too cold out tonight. I suppose I have no choice but to light these matches to warm myself.”

The woman stepped into an alleyway and lit one of her matches. The fire’s gentle light warmed her frozen hands. However, the fire lasted only a brief moment before going out. The woman groaned. It seemed she would have to do what she would rather not.

“Ascend in a swirling vortex of crimson fire... Blaze Tempest!”

A burning pillar of fire erupted in front of the woman. She hadn’t wanted to use magic, but it was too cold not to. Don’t ask why someone who could use fire magic was selling matches. Finally warm, the woman let out a contented sigh.

“I found her! She’s over there! You do this every night, you crazy pyromaniac! I’m taking you in! Men, tie her up!”

“Wh-What!?”

A horde of angry policemen surrounded the match-selling pyromaniac. The woman tried to run, but one of the policemen, a young, white-haired boy with an eye patch, grabbed her and started spanking her. Despite being punished, she looked oddly happy.

Remember kids, if you start fires in the middle of a city, you’re likely to get arrested. So don’t be an arsonist.

—The match-selling vampire princess

“Do you want to buy some matches? You do, right? You absolutely want these matches.”

It was a cold, windy night, and there was a girl pushing matches onto anyone who passed by. She had golden-blonde hair, red eyes, and a stunning figure. Most of the men nearby were more interested in her than her matches. However, if you didn’t buy her matches, this beautiful girl would crush your balls. As most people weren’t interested in exploring the world of extreme masochism, they gladly bought her matches. Thanks to that, the vampire girl did booming business.

Even women weren’t spared this girl’s wrath.

“Want some matches?”

“Huh? No, I don’t really...”

“.....” The girl stared pointedly at a mother until she finally gave in.

“I-I’ll take a box.”

“.....”

“I-I mean two boxes... no, three boxes, please...”

“Good. Thank you for your purchase.”

The poor woman bought a box for each of her kids as well. At least the children seemed excited to have matches to play with. As the lady walked away, the vampire girl spotted her next mark, a white-haired boy wearing an eye patch. He struck a rather handsome figure, or so the girl thought.

“Would you like to buy some match— Actually, would you like to buy me?”

She suddenly changed what she was selling. Most people would be suspicious of a girl claiming to sell herself. The boy sensed that this girl was up to something and quickly walked away.

“Would you like to buy me?”

Unfortunately, he was unable to escape.

—The match-selling demon

“W-Would you like to buy some matches?”

A girl stood at the corner of the street, selling matches. She seemed somewhat flustered.

At a glance, it seemed she was just desperate for customers. However, her gaze wasn't focused on the people milling about, but at a spot further down the street. In fact, she made no motion to offer her matches to the people walking past her.

Suddenly, the match-seller hid behind a nearby lamppost. Blushing, she peeked out behind it to stare at that same spot down the street. She was acting extremely suspicious. A passing child pointed to her and said, “Look mommy, it's that girl again. She's always standing there...”

“Shh! Don't look at her. Don't talk to her, either! She's a stalker!”

The match-seller didn't even notice she was being insulted.

Finally, the boy the match-selling stalker was waiting for appeared. He had white hair and wore an eye patch.

“I-I can do this! Today's finally the day I'll sell him a match and confess to him!”

There was no particular reason that she needed to sell him a match to confess, but she was too panicked to realize that.

“Hm? Wait? What's this? He's not alone?”

As she was pumping herself up, the match-selling stalker noticed something. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that there was another match-seller girl hanging off the boy's arm. The match-selling stalker's face went blank. The light went out of her eyes. Her nervousness forgotten, she marched boldly up to the white-haired boy.

“Hm? Who're you?”

“That's what I want to know. I'm the only match-seller he needs.”

“Oh? So you say you're the only match-seller worthy of him? Let

me show you just how fleeting your life is. You'll vanish faster than a match's flame."

Why the two of them were so hung-up on being match-sellers was something no one knew. The two of them struck grandiose poses. A giant thunder dragon appeared behind one match-seller while a demonic swordsman with a frightening mask appeared behind the other.

"Fufufufufufufu."

"Ahahahahaha."

Their ominous laughter rang out through the streets. There would surely be a fierce blizzard tonight. Oh, and the white-haired boy had long since run home.

Chapter IV: The Miraculous Meeting and the Phantasmagorical Adventure

A gentle sea breeze washed across the shore as waves lapped against the beach. Amidst this picturesque, tranquil scene, a single boy heaved a frustrated sigh. That boy was of course Hajime. Four days had passed since he and his friends had conquered the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. Hajime was currently sitting cross-legged on the wooden porch of Remia's house, seemingly deep in thought.

Judging by the ore and materials scattered around him, it looked like he was trying to create new artifacts. And indeed, he was currently trying to finish two new artifacts, an airship and a long-range laser that used focused sunlight. However, he lacked the fine-tuned mana control he needed to craft what he needed. On top of that, his current creation magic and transmutation skill weren't sufficient for the task. His lack of ability was the source of his current frustration. Or well, it was partly the source of his frustration. The rest of it came from—

“Daddy, it's lunchtime!”

The dagon girl who'd just jumped out of the ocean like a flying fish. Myu, the girl who'd gotten extremely attached to Hajime in the short time they'd been together. She leaped toward Hajime, still dripping seawater. If Hajime caught her, his clothes would end up soaked. So naturally, he—

“Hey, stop that! You're getting everything all wet, Myu!”

“I'm sorry!”

Caught her anyway. And even though he was scolding her, he didn't sound the least bit angry. Hajime had quite the soft spot for Myu.

“Where's Yue and the others?”

“They're already eating. They gave me a *mission* to come get you!”

Myu puffed her chest out proudly. Hajime, who almost perpetually had a frown on his face, smiled.

“I see. Thanks, Myu. You did great.”

In front of his adopted daughter, his dour personality vanished. Had Hajime's classmates been able to see him now, they would have been shocked. Even though he'd given them the cold shoulder, here he was, smiling warmly. For her part, Myu was all smiles as well. She loved nothing more than being praised by her beloved daddy.

Incidentally, her laugh was quite reminiscent of Remia's, and you could clearly tell they were related. Myu would gladly have spent the next hour nuzzling with her father, but she had a mission to complete. She quickly returned to her senses and got to her feet. She then grabbed Hajime's hand and pulled him up.

"Hurry, Daddy! Or Mommy's food will get cold!"

"Alright, alright, I'm coming. Want me to carry you?"

"N-No, I'm on a mission!"

Myu valiantly resisted the temptation to jump into Hajime's arms. *What a strong girl!* Hajime thought with a smile. But at the same time, he was still grappling with how he was going to tell Myu he'd need to leave her behind when he resumed his journey. That was the other reason for his sighs. As he let Myu pull him along, he furrowed his brows and gave the matter some more thought.

Lunch was a lively affair. Remia had made meat skewers, and Myu ended up getting her face covered in sauce as she devoured them. She sat between Hajime and Remia, and the two of them took turns wiping her mouth while reprimanding her for her lack of table manners. They looked like a perfect family. However— "Aww, I'm so jealous."

"Mrrr. Remia's spot was my spot when we were traveling..."

Kaori and Shea watched on with unbridled jealousy, while Tio laughed at the two of them. Yue, on the other hand, "I want a kid I want a kid I want Hajime's baby—" was muttering to herself like a broken record. Upon hearing Yue's ramblings, a slight smile crept up his face. Kaori gave Hajime a glare that could kill lesser beings, and a sudden shiver ran down his spine. Yue, on the other hand, grinned triumphantly. Kaori turned her murderous glare onto Yue, and the two settled into their usual fighting poses. Since arriving at Erisen, the two of them had squabbled at least five times a day. At this point, everyone was so tired of breaking them apart that this time they didn't even try.

"Oh my, how lively... Oh yes, that reminds me. How was today's adventure, everyone?"

But Remia was different. She had experience with child-rearing. In the face of Yue and Kaori's simmering wrath, she just smiled gently like always and changed the topic.

"Mrrr, we didn't find anything."

Myu's ears drooped, though she continued attacking her fish skewer with gusto. The past few days, she'd been leading Yue and the others on adventures near the outskirts of the city, but she'd yet to find anything interesting.

"Mmm... We couldn't find the treasure that was supposed to be hidden here when Erisen was built."

“Though we did discover quite a few caves.”

“Yep. The underwater ones looked really cool, too.”

“I guess this means six of the seven legends about Erisen are false.”

The so-called seven legends of Erisen were mostly just folk tales and urban myths known around the city. Aside from the city’s hidden treasure, there were also stories of a ghost that wandered the sea, a mysterious ghost ship that appeared in times of thick fog, a city hidden at the bottom of the ocean where the pirate king’s treasure lay, and a fish with a human head that was supposed to bring good fortune. But of course, they were just stories. They’d been examined by other adventurers long before Hajime’s party had arrived here, so of course they’d found nothing.

“What’s real is real!” Myu replied unhappily. Remia gave her daughter a troubled smile. Myu had been using an awful lot of strange phrases Remia didn’t understand the meaning of recently. After a few seconds, Remia turned to the man responsible for her daughter’s corruption. Hajime awkwardly averted his gaze.

“Uhh, anyway. Don’t let this get you down, Myu. There’s still one legend left to check, right?”

“Mhmm. The shimmering ocean.”

No one knew where this story came from or when it started, but this was the oldest and vaguest rumor of the western seas. According to legend, there was a shimmering ocean that would appear at random times in random places. It was large enough to span from horizon to horizon, and supposedly it was home to a creature or person or “thing” of some sort that would grant a wish to whoever found it.

“It’s such a romantic legend... If I found it, I could wish Yue would get stranded somewhere.”

“Die, Kaori...”

Yue drove her fist into Kaori’s side. Kaori yelped in pain and retaliated by poking Yue in the stomach. Yue squealed in surprise and quickly settled into her usual fighting pose. Round two was about to begin. Hajime completely ignored the catfight going on between the two of them and turned to Myu.

“I couldn’t go with you guys in the morning, but I’m free now. I’ve repaired the submarine too, so how about making our last adventure a grand one? We can search all day and spend the night in the ocean.”

“Mmm!? A sleepover adventure!? I wanna go!”

For a moment Myu looked like she was trying to hold herself back from saying something, but then she smiled and nodded vigorously. Remia patted her on the head and turned to Hajime with an expectant look.

“You wanna come too, Remia?”

“I would love to. Ufufu, it’ll be a family vacation, darling.”

That comment by Remia kicked off round three. Yue and Kaori whirled toward Remia, whose smile didn’t even falter. *Why do you always have to fan the flames like this?* Hajime thought despairingly to himself. But despite his exasperation, Hajime found he was enjoying himself. There was a slight smile on his face as he tucked away his lunch.

That evening, dark wispy clouds covered the night sky like a long trail of cotton candy. Hajime’s submarine looked like nothing more than a small shadow from that height. Though he’d made it much bigger when he’d repaired it after the trek into the ruins. He’d also enchanted it with gravity magic to turn it into a pseudo-hovercraft when it was above the water. As a result, it wasn’t affected by the waves at all, and Hajime and the others were able to enjoy a pleasant barbeque as they coasted across the sea.

“It doesn’t look like it’ll rain, but it’s a shame we won’t be able to see the stars...” Hajime muttered as he looked up, a pair of tongs in one hand.

“Mmm... Should I blow the clouds away?”

“That sounds a bit too dangerous.”

Only Yue would suggest altering the weather simply because she found it unpleasant. The others gave her nonplussed looks. Meanwhile, Hajime rejected the idea since he knew it would take up too much of Yue’s mana.

“If I’d been able to finish the airship we could have taken a trip among the clouds, too.”

“Daddy, what’s an airship?”

“It’s a ship that flies in the sky.”

“You mean it can fly just like the people in town!?”

For the record, Erisen’s townspeople did not know how to fly.

“Oh, I suppose those men did fly, in a sense. They traveled along quite a nice arc, too.”

Tio smiled as she recalled the event from a few hours ago. When the townspeople had learned Myu and Remia were going to go on a trip with Hajime, a bunch of them had started talking to the mother-daughter pair. Friends of Myu, friends of Remia, and a bunch of men jealous that Hajime was going on a date with their crush. The latter specifically had tried to stop Hajime at all costs, and naturally, they’d all been sent flying. Specifically, Hajime had rounded them all up with wires, then flung them into the ocean. The few persistent ones—such as the town mayor, a human noble appointed to rule the city by the king of Heiligh, and his administrative staff—Hajime had tied to missiles and launched into the sky.

“Remia-san and Myu-chan sure are... loved by the townspeople, huh...?” Kaori muttered softly.

“They’re all just jealous of Hajime-san. But I’m surprised there are humans who are interested in you even though you’re a beastwoman like me, Remia-san.”

“Mmm... That’s because Remia’s a devil.”

“U-Umm, Yue-san? Isn’t that a bit rude? I just happen to meet a lot of people thanks to my work...”

Surprisingly, Yue’s glare was powerful enough to silence even Remia. Incidentally, Remia’s job was to mediate between the humans sent by the kingdom and the dagon people that lived within the city. She was just one of many such mediators on the city payroll, and she was actually more of a part-time worker than anything. However, her signature smile and gentle demeanor were powerful enough to defuse any situation, no matter how tense. Before her benevolence, the prejudice and racism of humans vanished like mist, as did the resentment of the dragons they were ruling over. The residents of Erisen trusted Remia not only to handle official disputes, but also to resolve conflicts between married couples and siblings and the like.

“I remember the townspeople saying they all wished they could keep one of you in their house.”

Indeed, everyone in Erisen wanted a Remia of their own to keep their house peaceful and in order.

“P-Please don’t bring that up, Hajime-san. It’s rather embarrassing...”

Blushing, Remia brought her hands up to her cheeks.

“Daddy! Daddy! Everyone also says Mommy’s unbeatable!”

“They say that about you too, you know. I guess together you make the unbeatable mother-daughter pair.”

People didn’t call Remia unbeatable because she was a master at fighting or anything. No, they called her unbeatable because no matter how hard they tried to win her affections, she shot them all down without a second thought. As for Myu, whenever someone tried to get close to her as a way of getting close to Remia and say things like, “Hey Myu-chan, call me daddy!” she’d just reply with “No way!” and run off with a smile. As a result, everyone was jealous both that Remia called Hajime darling, and that Myu called him daddy.

“Remia-san. You’re not actually interested in Hajime-kun, are you?” Kaori asked timidly. Yue and the others suddenly turned to Remia with newfound interest. The young dagon woman glanced down at her daughter.

“Ufufu,” was the only reply she gave.

“What’s that laugh supposed to mean, huh!?”

“You’ve got guts, Remia... It’s a shame I’ll have to bury you at the

bottom of the ocean.”

Remia deflected Yue and Kaori’s threats with her usual gentle smile. And so, the barbeque-cum-adventure proceeded smoothly. A few hours and several warps later, the party had passed beyond the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, which they’d been using as a landmark, and were now hundreds of kilometers west of any known landmass. It was nearing midnight, and there was nothing in sight. Though everyone kept their eyes peeled from the comfort of the submarine deck, they didn’t find anything out of the ordinary. Before long, Myu’s eyes started to droop. She’d had a hearty dinner, and the gentle lapping of the waves combined with the soothing sea breeze was the perfect combo to lull someone to sleep.

“Myu, shouldn’t you go to—”

“Don’t wanna.”

Despite her drowsiness, Myu was determined to unearth the truth behind the last legend. Unfortunately, her body was already at its limits. Hajime turned to Remia, at a loss for what to do. Remia gave Hajime a troubled smile and patted her daughter on the head.

“Myu?”

“No.”

Still, Myu refused to let herself sleep. She’d stay awake by sheer force of will if that was what it took.

“Mmm... Myu. I’m feeling sleepy too. Let’s sleep together.”

Thanks for the save, Yue! Hajime thought. Yue’s resting expression made her look drowsy, so she was a pro at acting tired. However—

“You can sleep if you’re tired! I’ll take care of the rest!” Myu replied with a smile.

“Hajime...”

“Sorry.”

It was actually kind of impressive that Myu could remember the lines Hajime had taught her even when she was too tired to stand straight. Unfortunately, Hajime couldn’t exactly praise her while Yue was glaring at him.

“Myu. I’ll stay up, so you go to bed. Don’t worry, if we find anything I promise we’ll wake you up right away.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Myu rejected Hajime’s attempt at a compromise. She was being awfully stubborn about this last legend, and Hajime couldn’t quite understand why.

“Why not?”

“Because if I sleep, morning will come.”

“.....”

“Our last adventure’ll end.”

Myu sat down and hugged her knees, staring out at the moonlit

ocean. She wasn't excited about the adventure itself, she was just desperate to spend more time with everyone. When she said "our last adventure," she didn't mean the last legend of Erisen, she meant the last actual adventure she'd get to enjoy with Hajime and the others. Hajime wasn't so dense that he couldn't understand that. Besides, he'd spent the last few days agonizing over how to broach this exact topic. This whole time the party had been lounging around on the deck, Myu hadn't left Hajime's side. Even when he'd gone belowdecks to grab some tool or the other, she'd faithfully followed after him, like a baby chick following her mother. It was obvious what she was thinking.

"Myu..."

Hajime softly stroked Myu's emerald-green hair. He wasn't sure what to do, whether he should tell her they'd have to leave her behind now or save that discussion for later. He'd delayed his departure for quite a few days already because he was unwilling to part with Myu, but thinking back on it, he wondered if that hadn't been making the inevitable harder on her. At the very least, he didn't want their last memory together to be a depressing one. Hajime glanced over at Remia, and she gave him a quiet smile, as if to say she trusted whatever decision he made. Yue and the others seemed unsure of what to say too. Like Hajime, they'd spent the last few days trying to think of how to bring up the fact that they were leaving her behind.

"Myu," Hajime said softly.

She twitched, sensing from Hajime's tone that he was about to say something serious. She looked timidly up at him, her eyes welling up with tears. Myu was a clever girl; she knew what was coming. Hajime sat her on his lap and hugged her, then looked out at the ocean.

"It's really pretty, isn't it?"

"Mrr?"

"I mean the clouds and the sea. They look really pretty in the moonlight."

"Yeah..."

The moon had reached its zenith, and its light refracted across the wispy clouds, causing them to shine with a mystical light. What few moonbeams shot through lit up the ocean, making it scintillate.

"I've never seen an ocean this pretty before."

"Really?"

Myu looked up at Hajime in surprise. Since she'd been born and raised here, this was a familiar sight to Myu. But back on earth, only people who worked out on the ocean saw sights like this regularly. A regular high schooler like Hajime certainly hadn't had many opportunities to take boats out to open sea.

"And it's thanks to you that I can see it."

"It is?"

“Yeah. We’re all here because you invited us on an adventure.”

“Ehehe...”

Myu blushed happily. But Hajime’s next words wiped the smile off her face.

“I swear I’ll never forget this adventure for the rest of my life.”

“.....”

Myu’s expression grew dark again. She should have been happy to hear Hajime say that, but she was clever enough to know what that implied. Hajime quietly waited for her to say something. He was ready for her to tell him not to go, or to bring her with him. He knew what he would say to her too. But Myu didn’t say anything. She just bit her lip, desperately keeping the tears in her eyes from spilling down her cheeks. The painful silence stretched on for a few minutes. Eventually, Hajime let out a long sigh and put his thoughts in order. He opened his mouth to say what needed to be said, but just before he could speak—

“Ah!? What’s that!?”

A massive presence suddenly made itself known to the party, and shivers ran down their spine.

“Hajime-san, look up!”

Hajime reflexively looked up in response to Shea’s voice and saw that the sky was suddenly closing. Or rather, so many clouds were appearing that it looked like someone was closing a lid over the sky. Within seconds, the moon had been swallowed up by the roiling black mass.

“Myu, Remia. Don’t leave my side.”

The two of them nodded, looking worried.

“Hajime-kun, there’s mist coming in from everywhere... This isn’t normal, right?” Kaori muttered.

“Well this is a fantasy world, so for all we know, this is normal.”

“What do you think, Hajime?” Yue asked.

“Someone’s behind this.”

The fog rolled over the submarine, engulfing it. It was thick enough that people standing on opposite sides of the deck wouldn’t be able to see each other. It reminded Hajime of the fog in the Haltina Woods. Everyone quickly formed a protective circle around Myu and Remia.

“So is the legend real?” Shea asked.

“That’d be nice, but I don’t see any sparkling ocean anywhere,” Hajime replied.

“Master, look. Something’s coming.”

Tio’s voice was tense. She stared intently into the fog, trying to discern the truth with her dragon eyes, her golden, slitted pupils sparkling. Everyone turned toward the direction she was looking, and

a second later, they saw it.

“The hell is that?”

A massive shadow cut its way horizontally through the fog. Judging by its silhouette, it was easily over thirty meters long. But it made no sound as it passed. Nor did it create any wind. In fact, it didn't even disturb the fog. Almost as if it wasn't real. The night was so quiet that Hajime and the others could hear their own breathing.

“Was that a... whale?” Kaori muttered, her voice trembling. For as silent as the creature was, its presence was immense. And that was what terrified everyone. Including Hajime. As the creature circled around the submarine, he could make out what looked like fins jutting out from the body of the shadow, which supported Kaori's guess.

“My Demon Eye's not showing me anything... Hey, Tio.”

“My apologies, Master. But I know nothing about this creature, either.”

Tio, who was always so reliable and observant, shook her head, cold sweat pouring down her forehead. Suddenly, their submarine shook.

“Hajime-san!? Did you put us down in the water!? We're being carried away!”

“How!? It's still in hovercraft mode!”

A loud rumbling noise shattered the silence that had previously surrounded them. At the same time, the sea grew choppy and turbulent. A powerful current suddenly appeared underneath the submarine and started dragging it forward. Furthermore, the mist started to whirl around the party like a tornado as the unknown creature circled around them.

“Tch!”

“D-Daddy! Don't!”

Hajime reached for Donner, but Myu clung to him and begged him to stop.

“Myu!?”

“I'm sorry! But umm... I don't think he's a bad person!”

“Are you saying you...?”

Of course, Myu had no idea what the creature was, either. But it seemed she was sensing something from it. Something inside her was telling Myu that they couldn't hurt it, and Hajime could tell from the earnest look in her eyes that she sincerely believed that. She just couldn't express it in words. While Hajime was hesitating, their surroundings continued to transform. The whirlwind of mist sped up until they were surrounded by a wall of fog, making it look like they were in the eye of a storm. But the sky above them wasn't clear, like it would be in a normal storm. It, too, was covered in swirling dense fog. But instead of sucking up the surrounding water, the fog hurricane

was pushing it away, creating a crater in the ocean.

“Does it mean to drag us down to the bottom of the ocean?”

“It’s strange... I can sense mana from everything around us, both the fog and the water.”

“Hajime-san, I think we’ll be okay! I’m not seeing any future where we die, at least!”

Hajime shot Yue a glance. Though he said nothing, it was a trivial task for her to read his thoughts, and she quickly created a teleportation portal to let everyone escape. But before she could send anyone through—

“Daddy! He’s calling for us! He wants us to save him!”

“Wh-What?”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough time to process that or ask Myu what she meant. *Owooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!* The creature let out a howl. It wasn’t a threatening sound, though. In fact, it almost sounded melodic. A second later, Hajime and the others were surrounded by light, and their consciousness began to fade.

“Shi—” Yue shouted, panicking. The portal she’d created scattered to the four winds.

“Hang on, everyone!”

It was too late to escape now. At Hajime’s command, everyone hugged each other, with Remia and Myu at the center of the circle. The submarine dropped to the bottom of the ocean, and Hajime and the others blacked out.

“Ngh... Where are we...?”

Remia shook her head and groggily opened her eyes. Her disorientation quickly vanished when she realized that Myu, who she’d been hugging before losing consciousness, wasn’t in her arms. She leaped to her feet and shouted, “Myu! Where are you!? Say something! Mommy’s looking for you!”

Remia’s voice carried quite far. But she heard no reply from her beloved daughter. Looking around, she realized Hajime and the others were nowhere to be seen as well. Unease welled up within her. Her limbs felt frozen. Remia had sworn to herself that she’d never lose her daughter again. But now Myu wasn’t by her side. This couldn’t be happening. Just the thought that her precious daughter might be suffering somewhere alone caused her chest to tighten up.

“It’s fine... Everything will be fine. Hajime-san and the others are here too. She’ll be okay.”

You have to keep it together. She told herself. Slowly the impatience and unease began to recede, and Remia could think clearly again. After a few deep breaths, she’d more or less calmed down. She took a look around, taking stock of her surroundings. She was standing on a

path of cracked cobblestones, which was surrounded by the walls of crumbling buildings. It seemed she'd been transported to the back alley of some city.

Determined to find Myu, Remia dashed out of the alleyway. She emerged onto the main street, which was nearly twenty meters wide and surrounded on both sides by massive buildings she'd never seen before. The road seemed to continue on forever, disappearing into the horizon. In the other direction, the road continued for around three kilometers, stopping at a massive castle that had a large cylindrical tower reaching up to the heavens. Remia, who possessed neither superhuman jumping strength nor the ability to fly, could only estimate the scale of this city, but by her estimation, it had once been quite huge. Not only that, it would have taken some serious engineering skills to build.

But whatever it had once been, now it was just an abandoned, dilapidated ruin. The houses and buildings were all in disrepair and looked to be uninhabited. Indeed, Remia saw not a single person anywhere. Looking up, she saw that dark thunderclouds covered the city, occasionally sending down flashes of lightning. A faint black fog covered the city as well, making the air seem sooty and polluted. There was an overall oppressive atmosphere surrounding the city as well, as if people didn't belong in it.

"Where have I ended up?" Remia mused, mostly to distract herself than anything. Last she recalled, they were being pulled down to the bottom of the ocean. After a few seconds, Remia started running down the deserted street.

"Myu! Where are you! Mommy's looking for you!"

She glanced here and there as she ran, searching for her daughter. The old cobblestone road was cracked and broken, with sharp pieces of rubble strewn about everywhere. Dagens generally didn't wear sturdy shoes either, so it was doubly dangerous for Remia to run. Especially since she wasn't looking at where she was putting her feet. Naturally, it wasn't long before she hurt herself.

"Ah!"

Her flimsy sandal hit a sharpened piece of rubble, and the thin cords it was woven of ripped apart. Remia reflexively pulled her leg back, but her foot came away bloody. She tore off what remained of her broken sandal without hesitation and, ignoring the pain in her foot, continued running down the street. In seconds her feet were covered in numerous scrapes and cuts, but she didn't stop. Myu was the most precious thing in the world to her; she couldn't let a little pain stop her. But it wasn't her daughter who answered her desperate cries.

"Huh? Who... might you be?" Remia asked.

Her shouting had attracted a rather shady figure. The figure resembled a person, but Remia couldn't be sure it actually was one. They were wearing a robe that covered them from head to toe, and Remia couldn't make anything out of their face. In fact, she couldn't even see their mouth. Furthermore, the robe the figure was wearing was unnatural. It seemed more liquid than solid. To Remia, it looked as though the figure was clad in a layer of flowing black tar.

Alarm bells started going off in her mind. Whatever that figure was, her instincts told her it was dangerous. She had to run, now. But this was the first person she'd seen in this ghost town, and the possibility that they might provide her with information caused her to hesitate. What if they knew where Myu was? Her love for her daughter caused Remia to ignore her instincts and approach the strange figure.

"U-Umm... have you seen a little girl—"

Before she could finish, the figure's robe began to ripple. A second later it contracted and began to morph into the shape of a giant scythe. The figure advanced on Remia, scythe in hand. It looked like the grim reaper from Earth's legends. Pale-faced, Remia took a trembling step backward. She tripped over a piece of rubble and fell to the ground. The dread emanating from the figure was so great she couldn't even scream. Her gaze was glued to the terrifying figure.

But some part of her was still shouting, *You have to find Myu! Get a hold of yourself! You're her mother!* in the back of her mind. It scolded her over and over, urging her to get to her feet. Even though she was too terrified to move, even though she was up against a monster the likes of which she'd never seen, in her heart of hearts, Remia still didn't give up. She couldn't afford to give up. So she glared at the menacing reaper bearing down on her with every ounce of defiance left in her. A second later, a streak of red light shot through the reaper's head.

"Huh?" she muttered, dumbfounded. Tar dripped from the gaping hole in the reaper's head, looking uncannily like polluted brain fluid. In the corner of her eye, Remia spotted the sleeve of a familiar, comforting black coat.

"You've got guts, staring him down like that. Guess I should have expected as much from Myu's mom."

Hajime landed on the ground next to Remia. Her eyes widened in surprise and she looked up at him.

"Hajime-san! Wh-Where's Myu!?"

"Sorry, but we'll have to talk later," Hajime replied curtly. He picked her up with one arm, and she reflexively clung to his neck with an involuntary squeal. He leaped backward, and a second later something whooshed past Remia's ear. Turning around, Remia saw a

reaper's scythe inches from her face. It seemed there was more than one black-robed figure. More than two, even. They started popping up in all directions, oozing out of cracks in the walls or floor. Soon enough, Hajime and Remia were surrounded by twenty reapers.

"Hang on tight. This is going to get rough."

"O-Okay," Remia replied reflexively to the commanding tone in Hajime's voice.

— The grim reapers let out a wordless, soundless howl as they spread their liquid cloaks out. *Is that like a war cry?* Hajime thought to himself. A fierce gust of wind whipped across the battlefield. Even Hajime's Demon Eye couldn't find out where these strange monsters' mana crystals were, and he had no idea what that liquid tar they were wrapped in actually was. In fact, he wasn't even sure if these were monsters, or if they were sentient. But if they were after him, there was only one thing to do.

"I don't have time to deal with trash like you."

As the reapers charged, Hajime's hand began to glow with crimson light. A second later, seven Cross Bits appeared out of thin air. They formed a protective circle around Hajime, their muzzles pointed outward. Hajime raised his hand, and they all fired at once. There was a thunderous boom as streaks of lethal light shot toward the reapers. Regardless of what they were made of, it seemed the reapers weren't capable of withstanding the physical and magical force of Hajime's bullets. They were blasted backward, tar leaking from their wounds like blood.

Hajime then leaped backward, and a second later another reaper oozed out of the ground he'd been standing on. He didn't even spare it a glance as he blasted it with Donner. Five other reapers bore down on him from the air and he smashed them all as well with a series of highly accurate shots. Four other reapers swung at Hajime from all sides, aiming for the moment when he landed. But he ducked under their scythes with ease, reloading his revolver in the meantime. After reloading, he spun on one foot like a top, pumping Donner's trigger. Four streaks of light shot out in a cross formation, killing the four reapers.

"You're getting in my way. Die already."

A fierce grin crept up Hajime's face. His pupils dilated, sparkling with unrestrained bloodlust. Faced with the unleashed monster of the abyss, the reapers faltered. As did Remia, who was seeing Hajime's bloodthirsty side for the first time. But while Hajime's demeanor was a bit of a shock, she found that she wasn't actually scared of him. Partly because she realized that despite being in a life-or-death battle, Hajime was taking care not to move so violently that it'd hurt her. But mostly because she understood where his anger and impatience were

coming from. He was worried about Myu, too.

“Hajime-san...”

“Remia. Plug your ears. I’m gonna blow these bastards away.”

Remia didn’t know why she called out to Hajime, or what she was even planning on saying to him, but his interruption gave her the perfect opportunity to shut up and nod. A second later, Hajime withdrew his rocket launcher, Orkan. He fired off a barrage of missiles, blowing up everything nearby. The resulting shockwaves obliterated the nearby ruins, leveling everything within a hundred-meter radius. Once the dust settled, Remia could see nothing was left in the vicinity. No reapers, no ruins, no cobblestone road. Still, Hajime scanned the area thoroughly, wary of any sudden attacks. Only once he was sure it was safe did he put Orkan away and relax.

“Sorry, Remia. I haven’t been able to find Myu yet. You’re the first person I found.”

“Huh? Oh... I see.”

It took Remia a second to realize he was continuing their conversation from earlier, but when she did her face fell.

“This city’s huge. I checked from the sky too, and I can’t tell where it ends.”

From how high up Hajime had checked his surroundings, he guessed the city was at least 60 kilometers across, if not more. There were a few cities on Earth that big, but none in Tortus.

“I’m guessing that castle’s sitting at the city’s center. Since there are roads that head straight out of it going east, west, north, and south. I’m thinking of heading for that castle while destroying everything in our path.”

No matter which of the four main streets someone ended up on, they’d be able to see the castle from where they were. Since it was such a central landmark, Hajime figured everyone else would try and congregate there. Furthermore, Hajime knew they were somewhere north of the castle, meaning that he and Remia must be on the north main street. He knew that because before he’d met up with Remia he’d found a faded signpost that had mentioned this was the north side. Though the signpost had been written in a language he hadn’t seen before even in Tortus, his Language Comprehension skill had allowed him to read it.

“D-Did you just say destroy everything in our path?”

“Yeah. The best way to tell people where we are is blowing stuff up. Well, if they’re all on the south side they probably won’t be able to hear the gunshots or explosions until we’re pretty close to the castle, but... it’s better than doing nothing.”

A tinge of unease entered Hajime’s voice as he said that. When he’d flown up into the sky, he’d seen the giant wall that separated the

northern and southern parts of the city. It had been like a scaled-up version of the Great Wall of China. Hajime had no idea what the purpose of the massive wall was, but from what he'd been able to make out from a distance, the south side's buildings weren't as grand as the north side's. *Maybe the two halves of the city serve different purposes or something happened to make the south side collapse faster than the north?* Regardless of the reason, Hajime had a sneaking suspicion that the massive wall was thick enough to block out sounds between the two sides.

Still, he was right in saying that blowing stuff was up still better than doing nothing. Of course, he was also constantly calling out to his comrades via telepathy, and he'd sent a number of his Ornises out to scout the area up ahead to make sure he wasn't accidentally getting anyone caught up in the demolition.

"Won't that attract the attention of those *things* though?" Remia asked, her expression stiff. She was suddenly worried her sanity might not withstand traveling with Hajime.

"Don't worry, I'll slaughter them all if they come."

"I-I see..."

As always, Hajime had no compunction about killing anything in his way. This time, even Remia couldn't just brush it off with an, "Oh my."

Cold sweat poured down her back. Hajime ignored her trepidation and lowered her onto the ground. As her feet touched the stone the pain she'd forgotten about came back in a rush and she gasped.

"Hm? Why're you barefoot?"

"My sandals were making it hard to run, so I..."

"I see..."

Hajime instantly realized how desperate Remia must have been while searching for Myu. He stamped his foot on the ground, instantly transmuting an impromptu chair from the cobblestones. He then sat Remia down on it and knelt down in front of her. He picked up her bloodied and battered feet and carefully examined them. After a few seconds, he rested them on his knee.

"H-Hajime-san?"

"I'm just fixing up your feet. I can't use healing magic, but I've got some potions and a first-aid kit."

"I'm fine. Forget about me, we need to find Myu."

Hajime slowly looked up at Remia.

"Do you plan on letting it happen a second time?"

"Ah!"

There was no need to specify what Hajime meant by "it." Remia knew. Just as Remia had sworn she'd never lose Myu a second time, Myu was almost certainly thinking she never wanted to see her

mother hurt a second time. If Myu saw the state Remia was in, she'd no doubt cry.

"Besides, it won't take long."

"Okay... Umm... Hajime-san? Thank you for saving me."

"It's because you're Myu's mom."

Like Remia, Hajime wanted to start searching for Myu as fast as possible. Which was why he was treating Remia as quickly as he could, and responding curtly. However, his reply brought a smile to Remia's face. Because it made it clear he cared about Myu as much as she did. Seeing his desperation warmed Remia's heart. Which was why she found herself asking, "Myu's... okay, right?"

It was a pointless question, since she knew Hajime didn't have the answer. But she just wanted him to say something that would take the edge off her anxiety.

"Course she's okay. She's braver than anyone I know. Plus she's smart, too," Hajime responded instantly. He believed in Myu the same way he believed in his comrades, and he didn't doubt for a second that they'd all be reunited.

Ah... He really is a strong kid... Remia thought to herself. She wasn't just referring to the overwhelming strength she'd just seen on display when he'd destroyed the reapers. Hajime had the strength of heart to believe the future he desired was always within his grasp, and give his all to make it happen. Remia could see it in him. It was that strength of his that had made her crybaby daughter strong, too. Myu had looked up to Hajime's strength, and in trying to become more like him, she'd grown. That was why she called Hajime daddy even though she'd refused to call anyone else that. Though she was happy to see her daughter growing up, Remia couldn't help but feel a little jealous of Hajime as well. And that birthed a desire to tease him a little.

"You sure understand our daughter well, darling!"

Remia put on her usual gentle smile. The smile that everyone praised, and that she used as a mask to deal with others.

Now then, is he going to get angry with me and tell me to stop pestering him, or just give me that exasperated look of his? Remia nervously waited for his reply, but Hajime didn't even look up at her as he said, "Why bother keeping up the act when Myu's not around?"

Remia closed her half-open mouth, unsure of what to say. Hajime had finished treating one foot and was moving on to the second, but Remia hardly even noticed the pain going away.

"You could tell it was an act?"

"What, the whole darling thing?"

Hajime had long since figured out why Remia was always dodging the question when people asked her if she was really into him or not.

"You were only doing that for Myu's sake, right?"

Remia nodded apologetically. She hadn't wanted to say the truth in front of Myu. She couldn't. Of course, there was no way she'd actually fallen for Hajime at first sight just because he came back with her daughter. But she couldn't bring herself to tell Myu that Hajime wasn't really her daddy. Or that she wasn't interested in him. After all, Hajime was the first person Myu had ever deigned to call daddy. So whenever Myu was present, Remia had made a big show of getting along with Hajime. However, there were plenty of girls around Hajime who truly *were* in love with him. And so she'd felt it wouldn't be fair to them to lie and say she was sincerely interested in Hajime when they asked.

Which was why she'd settled for acting evasive instead, using her trademark smile. After all, she knew they'd part ways before long.

"I'm sorry... for causing you so much trouble."

She felt bad for prioritizing her daughter even when she owed Hajime so much for bringing Myu back. For taking advantage of Hajime after all he'd done. Remia hung her head in shame.

"Well, it's no big deal, really. I feel like Yue and the others have probably figured it out, anyway."

Hajime finished treating Remia's feet. All the cuts and scrapes had healed over cleanly. While there had been a lot of them, most had been shallow so a few healing salves had been enough. He then opened his Treasure Trove and took out a spare pair of women's boots, which he handed to Remia. The whole time he seemed wholly unconcerned about her confession. Remia slowly pulled on the boots while Hajime turned around and started monitoring the feeds from his Ornises. As she looked at his back, she couldn't help but wonder.

"Aren't you mad?"

Hajime looked over his shoulder and replied, "You're doing it for Myu's sake."

He shrugged as if to say that was reason enough. And for him, it was. He wasn't so petty that he'd try to find fault with the methods Remia chose to support her daughter. Especially since he cared for Myu too. After hearing his answer, Remia found herself at a loss for words. She didn't know what to think about Hajime anymore.

"Hm? Isn't that...?" Hajime muttered, finding something on one of his feeds. He zoomed in to see an explosion of golden mana.

"Remia, let's go!"

"O-Okay!"

Hajime held out his hand, making it clear he was planning on carrying Remia again. It made sense, considering he was much faster than her. However, Remia took his hand without hesitation. Almost as if she trusted him with her life. Strangely enough, though, Remia felt uncomfortable in his arms. Not because she hated him. No, rather for

the opposite reason. Suddenly, the prospect of wrapping her arms around Hajime's neck felt embarrassing. But now wasn't the time to worry about that. Her daughter's life was still in danger. Remia pushed her embarrassment down and clung to Hajime. A second later Hajime kicked off the ground and the scenery started flying past. Though they were moving at insane speeds, Remia wasn't at all afraid.

"Hajime-san, thank you very much. Truly, I mean it."

She was thanking him not just for saving her back there, but also for everything he'd done for Myu. As always, Hajime didn't look down to meet her eyes.

"You don't need to thank me. I am sort of her dad, after all," he replied lightly.

Remia chuckled to herself. This time, it wasn't a pretend laugh, but a real one.

Meanwhile, Myu herself was...

"Mrr..."

Currently hiding behind a few pieces of rubble inside a small alleyway. There was no one else around. When Myu had awoken, she'd found herself alone in an eerie, abandoned city seemingly filled with malice. Any small child would have been too terrified to move, but not Myu.

"I have to hurry and save Mommy!"

Myu bravely poked her head out from behind the rubble. She quietly glanced around. The strange malice that she'd sensed upon first waking up had thinned somewhat. And as far as she could tell, nothing was waiting to ambush her nearby. Myu took a deep breath. Then she resolutely got to her feet. Naturally, she was still scared. That much was evident by how she was trembling. Her eyes darted about fretfully as well. But even so, Myu took a step forward.

Just like Hajime had said, she was brave. As she strode forward, Myu thought about her beloved daddy. As well as the kind, strong, cool girls that traveled with him. Utilizing everything she'd learned in the short time she'd spent with everyone, Myu continued striding forward. Eventually, she exited the alleyway and moved onto the main street. The main street itself was littered with chunks of rubble large enough to be boulders, limiting Myu's vision.

"Is that... a castle?"

At the end of the street, a good distance away, Myu saw a castle with a giant tower. Flanking the castle on either side were walls higher than any she'd seen before. The buildings around her were all in disrepair, and none were terribly tall. At most, they were four stories high. She'd seen Fuhren before when she'd been kidnapped, but from what she could tell, this ruined city was many times bigger

than it.

“Mommy’s probably looking for me...” Myu muttered to herself. Though she was still disoriented, she forced herself to think.

“If she can’t find me she’d... probably go to the castle?”

As far as Myu could tell, that was the biggest landmark. It made sense that Remia would head there.

“Daddy’ll definitely go there.”

Of that, Myu was certain. While she might not have known the meaning of the word itself, she knew Hajime and the others always acted rationally.

“If I go there... I’m sure Daddy’s Ornis birds will find me! And then we can search for Mommy together. Or maybe he’s found Mommy already. I know there are bad things here, so I have to go slowly or they’ll see me...”

Myu made a small fist, confident that she could do this. Of course the dimly lit, menacing street was quite daunting to someone as young as Myu, but she motivated herself by thinking of Hajime.

“Daddy always said if you give up the adventure’s over! I can do this! I’m a big girl! Do your best! I can fly! Yes, we can!”

Myu didn’t really know what the last few phrases meant, but they’d sounded cool when Hajime had said them so she used them as encouragement. She was the daughter of the monster of the abyss, she wasn’t going to let anything stop her!

“This way.”

“HOIAejghoasjgoaigfj!?”

Just as she was about to take a bold step forward, she heard a mysterious voice, making her scream in surprise. Panicking, she quickly clapped her hands over her mouth and retreated to the safety of the rubble. Her heart was pounding wildly and there were tears in her eyes. For all her bravery, Myu was still a little girl.

“This way, girl of the sea.”

Myu twitched, but managed to suppress her scream this time. The voice sounded like it was coming from inside her head. She looked around frantically, but couldn’t spot anyone.

“Wh-Who might you be?”

Now she was using her mother’s politeness. Sadly, the disembodied voice didn’t say anything other than repeat, “this way.” It was obviously suspicious. But after calming down and thinking about it, Myu realized the voice somehow “felt” the same as the creature they’d seen the silhouette of.

“Are you the shadow?”

By shadow, she was referring to the massive creature that had brought them all here. Despite how large its presence had been, Myu hadn’t found it scary at all. In fact, she’d found it quite comforting.

She'd felt the same sense of security around it that she did when she was swimming in the ocean.

"Hurry, child of the sea. Danger is coming."

Exasperated by Myu's continued inaction, the voice imparted slightly more concrete information. That was enough to convince Myu.

"This way?"

Somehow, she could tell which direction the voice wanted her to go in.

"I will take you to your brethren. To another strong child of the sea."

"Do you mean Mommy?" Myu asked, but there was no reply. She shut her mouth and obediently followed the voice's directions.

The rubble made it hard to walk, and Myu needed to be careful where she stepped, so she didn't make too much noise. She followed the mysterious voice's guidance, and whenever it said danger was near she stopped breathing and waited quietly for the dangerous robed figures to pass. To her surprise, she was much calmer than she expected. She was nervous of course, but only a little, and it made her thinking sharper. It helped that she'd already experienced being in a dark, dirty, dangerous place before.

Compared to her time in the underground prison, this was far better. She had a guide, and people she could trust looking for her. Plus, she wouldn't have to escape into a sewer this time. Probably. Most importantly, though—

"I need to hurry and Mommy." She had a mission.

Myu needed to find her mother, who was as powerless as her. The last thing she wanted was her beloved mom getting hurt because of her again.

"I'm sorry."

Suddenly, the voice apologized to her. Myu suddenly remembered that the shadow had been asking for help, too.

"Mister Shadow, what's your name? What do you want us to do?"

It was only at this point that Myu realized she hadn't even asked the shadow what its name was. But the only reply she received was the same apology as before, and another plea for help. It appeared the shadow couldn't communicate very effectively. Normally, that would have been strange, considering how immense a presence it had been, but Myu seemed to understand both that this was the case, and that it wasn't strange.

"You must be really weakened right now..."

It occurred to Myu that it might have used up the last of its power to call everyone here.

"Seek out they who can create, they who can scar the flow of

time.”

It sounded more like it was talking to itself than Myu. She was paying close attention to the voice as she walked, so she picked up everything it had just said, but half of the words had been too complicated for her to understand. Still, she was almost certain it was talking about Hajime. However, its next words threw her prediction off.

“Though they live in different times, the two shall share this moment. I have brought those who share your comrades’ powers here for that purpose.”

“T-Two?”

Myu was half-guessing what the voice was trying to say, so when it added clarifications that didn’t line up with her predictions, it left her completely lost.

“Mrrrr, right now all I can do is keep going!”

Myu pushed her questions aside from now and focused on the task at hand. The voice might be guiding her along the safest route possible, but carelessness could still lead to death. Just then, Myu heard a thunderous roar.

“Mrrr!?”

The earth shook, and she was knocked off her feet. A second later, there was another series of noises. Someone was fighting. Whoever they were, they were behind Myu. Probably two or three streets away at least. But they were getting closer. Myu was still quite far from the castle. And with the speed she ran at, they’d catch up to her in no time.

“Is it Daddy?”

She had a feeling it wasn’t. Myu knew what it sounded like when Hajime fought. And there were no gunshot sounds, or explosions, or streaks of red light. She guessed it was Yue, or perhaps Shea.

“Hurry, child of the seal! Your brethren are near!”

There was a sense of urgency in the shadow’s voice now. Myu, too, sensed danger closing in on her quickly and with a hesitant, “O-Okay,” she turned her back to the fighting noises and started to run. Whatever scary “things” she could feel were catching up to her fast. They’d probably been lured here by the sounds of fighting. Or maybe they’d finally locked onto Myu’s location. Either way, it was clear to Myu that they wouldn’t just pass her by like they did before. Though she wanted to cry, she gritted her teeth and kept her tears bottled up. If there was time to cry, there was time to run. She could no longer afford to care about where she stepped, and soon enough her feet were covered in cuts just like Remia’s had been. As a result, her speed dropped. And eventually, her feet caught against a loose piece of rubble and she tripped.

“Awaah!”

Tears sprang to her eyes as her knees slammed against the ground. Looking up, Myu realized she'd run all the way to a wide plaza. More importantly, though, she sensed something behind her. Raising herself into a sitting position, Myu turned around. Behind her, she saw a giant wolf with no fur glaring at her.

“Ah...”

Her voice came out as a soft whimper. She was too terrified to scream. Her instincts were yelling at her to run, but she was rooted to the spot. The creature stalking her was unbelievably grotesque. Worse, it had brought its minions with it. Smaller wolves loped out from gaps in the buildings, surrounding Myu. Chunks of rotten flesh dripped from the large wolf's furless body, and it bared its fangs at her. But just as it leaped forward, a blinding flash of light filled Myu's vision. A second later, the giant wolf was blown backward.

“A-A whale?”

Indeed, it was the whale who had intervened to save Myu. But now the whale was only two meters long, swam through the air, and was made of glowing particles of light. And it had just tackled the wolf out of Myu's way. The wolf slammed into the building behind it and was buried under a mountain of falling debris. But it quickly blew the debris away with a gust of bloody wind, and let out a ferocious howl. A second later, its tiny minions rushed at Myu. The whale made of light slid down to where Myu was and overlapped its body with hers. The aura of light surrounding Myu blocked the wolves' fangs, keeping her safe. It then flashed again, blowing the wolves back. Myu was safe for the moment, but she knew she couldn't relax just yet.

“Uuu...”

The bloodlust emanating from the wolves was sapping away her courage. She was shivering in fear, and it looked like she could pass out at any moment. The thought of just giving up and letting the whale take care of the rest crossed her mind. In fact, she was about to do just that when she suddenly realized something.

“Are you getting smaller, Mister Whale?”

It wasn't just her imagination. Since Myu herself was small it was still big enough to cover her completely, but the whale was definitely shrinking.

“Is it because you're protecting me?”

The whale didn't reply. Myu still had no idea what it actually was. But she knew it was sacrificing itself to protect her. And it had the same warmth to it that the shadow and the voice had possessed. Myu gritted her teeth again and wiped her tears away. She rallied her courage and got to her feet, cutting through her fear.

“Mister Whale! I'm okay now!”

Her voice was trembling and her face was pale. She was clearly not okay. But the determination in Myu's eyes was unwavering.

"I'll keep running, so run with me!"

It felt as though the whale shined brighter for a moment. As if Myu's bravery was giving it strength. She glanced toward a nearby alleyway. She planned to run into a narrow space and hide there to buy time until Hajime came to save her. Don't give up, no matter what. That was the most important lesson Myu had learned from Hajime and the others. But before she could start running, the wolves surrounded her from all sides. As if mocking her new resolve. Even so, Myu didn't falter. She sucked in a huge breath and shouted, "Do your worst!"

At the very least, she wouldn't be beaten in spirit. A second later the pack of wolves leaped toward Myu.

"Oh my. You're quite spirited, for one so young."

But before they could reach her, they were washed away in a torrent of water.

"H-Hweh?"

Myu blinked in surprise. She watched as the current of water snaked around the wolves like a living creature, going into their mouths to destroy their bodies from the inside, crushing them through sheer water pressure, or cutting them to pieces with precise jets. Though Myu was inside this whirling current, none of the water even touched her. It moved protectively around her like a barrier. None of the wolves could get close to her no matter how hard they tried. The giant alpha wolf tried to use its blood wind to blow the water away, but its paltry wind was swallowed up by the giant press of water.

"I-Is that one of your friends, Mister Whale?"

The shimmering whale didn't reply. But it separated itself from Myu, as if to say everything was going to be okay, and started shrinking faster. Once it was small enough to fit in her palm, it plopped onto her head and remained there. As Myu looked up in confusion, the same woman's voice from earlier called out to her.

"My, you have some interesting friends, young lady."

Her voice was gentle, far gentler than one would expect from someone who was engaged in a fierce battle with monsters. Myu looked up and saw—

"Mommy?"

An older dagon woman was sitting elegantly atop an arch of water. Her gentle demeanor and faint smile reminded Myu of Remia, which was why she'd reflexively said, "Mommy." But this woman was wearing completely different clothes from Remia.

"M-Mommy? I wasn't expecting anyone to call me that. Ah, hang on a moment."

The older lady drew the cutlass at her waist and sliced the wolf charging at her in half. The giant wolf charged at the same time from behind, but the lady's cutlass shattered into pieces and she swung it like a whip at the alpha wolf, using a small water current to keep the cutlass-pieces mostly linked. Anywhere her water whip struck, the wolf's flesh was shaved away. The shards of cutlass inside the whip were vibrating at a high frequency, making it into a kind of chainsaw. The wounded alpha wolf tried to leap back and regroup, but the lady didn't relent.

"Mutts that can't follow orders need to be punished. Come, grunt like a pig for me."

The lady started scoring the wolf with a consecutive series of whip lashes. With every strike, more of its flesh was shaved off, and it started whimpering pitifully. Funnily enough, its whines did sound like the grunting of a pig. This dagon lady might have had the same gentle look to her as Remia, but she was far more sadistic than Remia ever could be.

"Sorry about the interruption. At any rate, I'm not your Mommy."

"Ah, yes. You're not."

The alpha wolf had been reduced to a pile of meat and bones. The few remaining minions it had left were about to be next. The dagon lady brandished her whip, making it clear she didn't intend to let even a single one escape. The whole time she was goring the wolves, she maintained that gentle smile that was so reminiscent of Remia. Honestly, it was a little scary. Myu felt bad for ever thinking this woman could have been her mother.

"Umm... thank you for saving me. Who are you? I'm Myu!"

"My, what a polite young lady you are. Saying thank you and introducing yourself is an important part of proper manners."

The older woman grinned. At the same time, she sent torrents of water rushing out in all directions to clean up the blood, guts, and corpses sprawled around the square. Once that was done, she moved her arch into the barrier that was protecting Myu.

"It's nice to meet you, fellow dagon girl. I am—"

The water barrier burst apart into a million tiny droplets that glittered like a kaleidoscope. The woman paused for dramatic effect, then finished with a dazzling smile, "Meiru. Captain of the Melusine pirate crew."

This was a meeting that shouldn't have been physically possible. But somehow, the light whale had traveled across time to unite Myu with the "other strong child of the sea," Meiru Melusine. A wielder of ancient magic and the ruler of the western seas. In order to rescue Myu, it had guided the two dagons to each other.

Myu wanted to ask if this really was all the whale's doing, but the

whale was sitting unresponsive atop her head. It seemed exhausted. Incidentally, Myu had been constantly pestering Hajime to tell stories of his adventures, so she had heard the name Meiru before.

“Mrr? Meiru? Meiru Melusine? Mrrr?”

Myu cocked her head, trying to remember why that name sounded so familiar. Before she could finish searching her memories though, Meiru squatted down in front of her and asked, “So, Myu-chan. Where exactly is this place? The truth is, I’m a little lost.”

Meiru furrowed her eyebrows. She explained that she’d been patrolling the waters around Andika, which was a city built on boats, with some friends of hers when suddenly a thick fog had started swirling around them. After that she’d found herself here, separated from all her friends. In other words, the exact same situation Myu and the others had encountered.

Once Meiru finished her explanation, Myu looked up and said brightly, “Meiru-oneechan, I’m lost, too!”

“You don’t live here?”

“I don’t think it’s possible for anyone to live here, Meiru-oneechan.”

“I-I suppose that’s true... Hm? Come to think of it, you resemble Diene quite a bit... Oh, Diene is my little sister. Being lectured on common sense by someone who looks just like my sister hurts a little, actually.”

Meiru’s shoulders slumped and Myu thought to herself, *Onee-chan’s amazing, but she’s also kind of useless.*

“Umm, so why are you here then, Myu-chan?”

Meiru cleared her throat and quickly changed the topic. Just as Myu opened her mouth to answer, the sounds of fighting she heard earlier returned. They were much closer this time, and Myu could see bolts of lightning arcing into the sky a few blocks away. A second later the air around the buildings a short distance away shimmered, then they were all blasted into bits.

“Myu-chan, don’t leave my side.”

“O-Okay!”

Myu huddled in Meiru’s shadow. For some reason, she found Meiru’s presence to be extremely reassuring. Even though they’d just met, and Meiru could use magic even though she was a dagon, and she called herself a captain of a pirate crew, Myu wasn’t scared of her at all. Her intuition told her Meiru was a good person. She felt the same way about Meiru that she did about the whale resting atop her head.

As for what Meiru was thinking of Myu, well—

Sh-She’s so cute! She’s friendly, honest, and she’s got a mascot-type thing on her head! In fact, she might even be as cute as Diene! This little

girl's an angel! Her thoughts were quite impure. But then Meiru was the same woman who'd planned to take over an entire city for her sister's sake. It was hardly surprising that she'd be overjoyed when the dragon girl she just saved started clinging to her.

Ironically, Myu had gotten closer to knocking Meiru out with happiness than any of her enemies ever had with violence. Fortunately, it didn't look like Meiru would need to fight right now anyway.

A few more buildings were blasted apart, and a horde of giant creature the size of horse carts flew into the square. There were fourteen of them in total, and they looked like giant frogs. Their skin was mottled black and green, and they looked absolutely disgusting. Worse, their tongues were forked, with the forked ends looking strangely like human hands, and the mottled patterns on their skin looked like screaming human faces. Just looking at them gave Myu goosebumps, that was how creepy they were. She reflexively clung to Meiru's thigh for comfort. It was a wonder she managed to keep herself from screaming.

Meiru opened her mouth to say something reassuring, but before she could, a person walked out of the ruins of the destroyed buildings.

"How *dare* you launch your disgusting spit at the beautiful, amazing Miledi-chan's face!? There's so much of it, too! I'm gonna crush you!"

And crush the frogs she did. Black spheres appeared above their heads, flattening them into the ground. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty who'd appeared into the square wiped her cheeks with her sleeve. Though she'd won, there were tears in her eyes. She turned around and wailed, "O-kun! I've been sullied!" She leaped toward the bespectacled young man who'd suddenly climbed up the pile of rubble.

"Uwaaaah! Stop Miledi, you're gonna get me all slimy!"

The youth dodged out of the way, casing Miledi to faceplant into a wall of rubble.

"Hey, Oscar... You're supposed to do the nice thing and hug me."

Miledi pulled her head out of the rubble and glared at the young man—Oscar.

"Oscar, that one was definitely your bad," said a tall, taciturn man who walked up behind Oscar.

"I knew I could count on you, Nacchan! Tell that four-eyed bastard off!"

Miledi circled around behind the tall man—Naiz—and tried to push him into Oscar. However, her hands struck only empty air as Naiz adroitly dodged out of the way.

"Oi, Naiz... Why're you avoiding me?"

“Because you’re covered in slime.”

“Damn you booooooooooooooth!” Miledi screamed in rage.

Myu watched from a distance as Miledi chased after Oscar and Naiz, determined to share the pain of being slimed with them.

“Pirates are weird people,” she remarked.

“I... suppose that’s technically true... But please don’t assume those three are what all pirates are like.”

In the first place, Miledi and co. weren’t even pirates. But rather than explain that, Meiru just called forth a stream of water to wash Miledi off. It was only after her torrent swallowed Miledi whole that Oscar and the others realized Meiru was here. Glad to finally be reunited, the three of them ran toward their dagon comrade.

“Meru-nee! I’m so glad you’re sa— Now just one minuuuuuuuuuuuuuuute! We’ve been here five minutes and you’re already kidnapping little girls!?”

“Torrential Burst.”

Miledi was once again swallowed whole by a tide of water and spun around over and over. When Meiru finally spat her out, she didn’t bother drying her this time, leaving her a sopping mess on the floor.

“U-Umm... are you okay?”

Myu poked her head out from behind Meiru and gave poor Miledi a sympathetic look.

“Y-You’re so kind... What an angel!”

“You can just ignore Miledi... Anyway, I’m glad you’re alright, Meiru. Also, who’s that girl?”

“There seems to be some kind of strange creature... That is a creature, right? The thing resting on her head, I mean.”

“Her name’s Myu-chan. Apparently, she’s lost just like us. Also, she’s my little sister now.”

Miledi and Myu both shouted, “What!?” at the same time. Myu hadn’t expected Meiru to suddenly adopt her as her little sister. Myu’s eyes met Miledi’s, who was also something like a little sister to Meiru. The two of them nodded at each other in sympathy. Oscar heaved an exasperated sigh, then knelt down in front of Myu.

“It’s nice to meet you, Myu-chan. I’m Oscar Orcus. Can we ask you a few things?”

Myu hesitated before replying. Something about Oscar’s name struck a chord within her memories.

“Oscar-oniisan... Orcus? Mrr? Isn’t that...”

“And I’m Naiz.”

“Naiz...oniisan.”

The final key Myu needed to link her memories together was Miledi’s self-introduction. The leader of the Liberators jumped to her

feet, lifted one leg, put her left hand on her hips, and made a peace sign with her right.

“And I’m the super pretty genius mage, Miledi Reisen!”

She finished her introduction with a wink. Suddenly, Myu’s eyes widened in recognition.

Miledi’s over-the-top actions had helped her recall all the stories about the labyrinths Hajime had told her. She pointed at Miledi and said triumphantly, “The world’s most annoying person!”

“Bwagh!?”

Being told that with such an innocent smile made the genius mage Miledi drop to her knees. Meanwhile, Oscar and the others burst out laughing. They turned away from Miledi, laughing uproariously.

Miledi glared at her comrades, but they didn’t stop. Her eyes twitching, she turned back to Myu and said, “Wh-What a strange thing to say. Have we met before, Myu-chan?”

“Nope! I’ve just heard stories about you!”

“I-I see. And who did you hear them from? I need to know who’s been telling young children lies about me.”

“Daddy!”

“Y-Your father?”

“Yep! Daddy said, ‘No one else in existence is as annoying as Miledi Reisen! If there was a contest for most annoying person in the world, she’d win it every single time!’”

“Bwahaha!”

“Hey, stop laughing O-kun, Nacchan, Meru-nee!”

“A-Also...”

“There’s more!? Does your daddy really hate me that—”

“He said, ‘I’ll never forgive that bitch for flushing us down a toilet.’”

“Not only does he hate me, but he also holds a grudge!? And what do you mean, flushing you down a toilet!?”

Suddenly, the laughter stopped. Oscar and the others gave Miledi cold stares. *I can’t believe you’re the kind of person to flush little girls’ dads down the toilet, Miledi...* their expressions all seemed to be saying.

“I-It’s not true! This has to be a misunderstanding! I’ve never flushed anyone down the toilet in my life! How would you even do that!?”

Who on earth is this kid’s dad!? Have we really never met before!? Miledi thought to herself. Meanwhile, Myu was happily rattling off all the stories that popped into her head. Her eyes glittered with excitement as she talked. She was actually meeting the people she’d heard about in Hajime’s tales!

“Oh, and you must be ‘Oscar the maid-lover,’ right, Onii-san?”

“Wha—?”

How do you know that!? Oscar thought, his glasses slipping off his face.

Before he could recover, Myu turned to Meiru and said, “Oh, and you must be the Meiru Melusine that Daddy said was a super sadist and really sloppy with housework! He told me never to become a dagon like you!”

“Huh!? I think I need to have a nice, looong talk with your daddy, Myu-chan.”

Meiru’s veins bulged with barely suppressed rage. *I’ll show you who’s a sadist!*

“And you, Onii-san...”

“Hrm? Wh-What about me?” Naiz asked hesitantly.

He’d hidden away from the world for decades, so he was pretty sure Myu’s father couldn’t possibly know anything about him, but he was still worried.

“You must be Naiz Gruen! Daddy said you were a lot better than the other three, and that you probably had a really hard time dealing with all of them!”

“Y-You know about the Gruen name?” Naiz was shocked, but for completely different reasons than the other three. Gruen was the name of the village Naiz was born in. The village he’d destroyed with his own two hands. The only living people who should have known that name were his three comrades.

It was now that Miledi and the others were beginning to realize there was definitely something strange about Myu. At the same time, Myu was beginning to realize this situation didn’t make sense, either. The Liberators who existed only in stories shouldn’t be standing right in front of her. But here they were, in the flesh.

Are they fake? Other people pretending to be them? But they look and sound exactly like Daddy said they did... and he said no one else knows about the Liberators...

Confused, Myu took an involuntary step backward.

Miledi stepped forward, her expression serious. But before she could say anything, Myu asked, “Why are you alive?”

“Bwagh!?”

Miledi crumpled to the ground again. She thought Myu was implying something like, “Aren’t you embarrassed to still be alive after all the horrible things you’ve done?”

“I-I’m sorry for living,” Miledi muttered despondently, kneeling on all fours.

“Whoa, are all dagon super sadists or something?”

“So this pure-looking child is going to end up like Meiru...”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean, Naiz-kun? And Oscar-kun, say that again and I’ll smash your glasses.”

Watching this exchange Myu realized what she said had somehow hurt Miledi. She hurriedly tried to resolve the misunderstanding, but Oscar said, “Nah, just leave her alone. More importantly, we need to know what you know.”

Naiz and Meiru nodded in agreement, while Miledi moaned, “Be kinder to your leadeeeeeeeer!”

Just then, a massive earthquake rippled across the ruined city. It was as if something massive was trying to push its way out of the ground. The air trembled. Myu squealed as the shockwave caused her to lose her footing, and Meiru reached over to catch her. But before she could, Myu was enveloped in a warm light. That light slowly carried her up into the air.

“Wawawah! Ah, Mister Whale?”

The light whale which had been resting quietly on Myu’s head suddenly enlarged back to its two-meter size and placed Myu on its back.

“Seek out they who can create. Hurry.”

The whale repeated its earlier request. Its voice was strained and trembling as if even saying that much was a struggle for it.

“Wh-What now!?” Miledi screamed in confusion.

Looking in the direction of the castle, she saw that dark clouds were starting to gather above it, and the tower was spewing some unknown black miasma. The black mist that covered the city was growing thicker as well. It felt as if the end of the world was approaching. A second later, multiple streaks of red light shot through the dark clouds. The moment she saw them, Myu’s face lit up.

“Daddy!”

It appeared Myu and the Liberators had been sent to one side of the wall, while Hajime and the others had been flung past the other. From the looks of it, they were fighting something while making their way to the castle.

“Child of the sea. There is... not much time.”

“Okay! I’ll get Daddy right away, don’t worry!”

“M-Myu-chan? Who are you talking to?” Oscar asked.

It appeared only Myu could hear the whale’s voice. Though now wasn’t the time to explain that to everyone. It was obvious the whale was in a hurry.

“The glowing whale! He’s the one who brought you guys here, Oscar-oniisan!”

“That guy?”

Oscar shot the glowing whale a suspicious look, but before he could do anything to it, Miledi held out a hand to stop him. She looked nothing like the pitiful wreck she’d been a few seconds ago.

“Myu-chan. What do we need to do?”

She asked only what was necessary, and Myu replied succinctly, "Go to the castle!"

A second later, the square was filled with malevolent creatures. As if reacting to Myu's desire and trying to stop it, countless wolves, frogs, and grim reapers oozed out the cracks in the walls and floor. They filled the square and the streets, a veritable wall of monsters. If they couldn't win in strength, they'd try to win with numbers. To Myu, it seemed like advancing through that overwhelming wall of monsters would be impossible. However—

"Bring it on!" Miledi just grinned fearlessly and slapped a fist against her open palm. Adversity? Hopeless situations? An overwhelming difference in numbers? That was nothing!

"Alright, O-kun, Nacchan, Meru-nee! Our little princess needs help! Let's show her what ancient magic can do!"

Miledi thrust her hand out and flattened the first wave of flesh-wolves with her gravity magic.

"Might as well, since it looks like helping her's the best way to find clues for how to get back."

Oscar shrugged his shoulders, then summoned a giant volley of enchanted swords which he flung against the mass of grotesque frogs.

"What kind of Liberator would refuse a child's plea?"

Naiz grinned faintly and shattered the space in front of them.

"Myu-chan's my precious little sister. There's no way I'd abandon her."

Meiru resurrected the stream of water she'd used earlier and used it to sweep away a bundle of grim reapers. Within seconds, the monsters had been massacred, leaving the way forward clear. Myu's eyes were as wide as saucers. Meanwhile, Miledi and the others confidently stepped forward. They were like knights escorting their young princess.

"Alright, let's go, Myu-chan," the leader of the Liberators said, looking back at Myu over her shoulder. Myu was touched by Miledi's kindness.

"We've got a few things we wanna talk to your daddy about. How dare he call me the world's most annoying person!? Don't you mean the world's most beautiful person!?"

And a second later, she was completely disillusioned. The Liberators were clearly motivated by personal grudges. Even Meiru was smiling sadistically at the thought of meeting Hajime.

"Th-Thank you."

Though she thanked them, Myu was secretly thinking, *Maybe these guys are useless after all... Also, I'm sorry for bringing these people to you, Daddy.*

“Tch... These fuckers are so persistent.”

Hajime clicked his tongue in irritation. He was using his gatling gun to mow down the hordes of monsters that kept popping up. But no matter how much he fired, their numbers didn't seem to thin. For each one that fell, another one showed up. Monsters were flooding out of the castle in droves. Hajime glanced to the side and saw his comrades, whom he'd rendezvoused with a few minutes earlier, fighting on the nearby rooftops.

Kaori was a little ways behind the others, maintaining a barrier to protect Remia. Shea was serving as her bodyguard, keeping the enemies away. Meanwhile, Yue and Tio were using their draconic thunder and breath respectively to mow down the hordes of enemies. No one felt very threatened by the oncoming wave. All the monsters had on their side was numbers. Sure, Kaori was half in tears because of how disgusting they looked, but no one was worried they might actually do any harm. However—

“Gah!”

One of the grim reaper's scythes grazed Hajime's flank, and blood spurted from the wound.

“Hajime!”

“Hajime-kun!”

Yue's expression grew murderous and she directed her lightning dragon to turn the reaper into ash. At the same time, Kaori cast a ray of healing magic on Hajime, closing his wound instantly. Since monsters had started pouring out of the castle, Hajime had suffered numerous small wounds like this. Normally, he wouldn't even have broken a sweat against enemies of this caliber.

“Damnit. Myu, where are you...?”

However, his worry for Myu was causing him to get impatient. He was controlling twelve different Ornises at once while fighting, which was distracting him. Even using Riftwalk, remotely controlling that many objects was pushing the limits of what Hajime was capable of. Since the bulk of his attention was focused on searching, he wasn't fighting at even close to full strength.

“Get out of my way— Asura.”

Yue sent out a pulse of gravity magic that crushed everything in a five-hundred meter radius in front of her. Naturally, that included all the monsters, too. She was pissed now.

“Hajime... get inside Kaori's barrier! Focus on searching for Myu!”

“These monster hordes are endless! Let Yue and I take care of them while you secure Myu!”

“...Fine. I'm counting on you two!”

Hajime gave the castle in front of him a hateful glare. *I wish I could just blow that thing to pieces.* Unfortunately, he couldn't do that

just yet.

It was obvious the castle was an integral part of whatever crazy situation they'd found themselves in. If he destroyed it, he might end up destroying their only means back home. Of course, it was possible destroying it was how they got back home, but then what if Myu got left behind? Hajime nodded to Yue and Tio, and the two of them switched from fighting offensively to defensively. He then leaped back to the safety of Kaori's barrier.

"Kaori. I'm gonna use Limit Break. The moment its effects end, use restoration magic on me."

"You got it!"

Kaori nodded firmly while Remia gave Hajime a scared look.

"Hajime-san... what if Myu...?"

"Believe in her."

He'd find her, no matter what it took. And when he did, he knew he'd find her safe and sound. It wouldn't do Remia any good to get heartbroken when they still didn't know anything for certain. She understood that was what Hajime was trying to tell her as well. She clasped her hands in front of her chest and replied, "Alright."

A second later, another earthquake rocked the city. Like the last, it seemed to originate from the castle.

"Eek!" Kaori screamed and stumbled backward. Her Hallowed Ground was riddled with cracks. Even though it was the strongest barrier spell in existence, the earthquake had been enough to nearly shatter it.

"Ngh. I felt that one," Shea groaned. She was standing in front of the barrier, her warhammer held in front of her like a shield. It seemed she'd protected Kaori's barrier with her own body. Kaori quickly healed her and her barrier.

Up in the sky, Yue coughed up a lungful of blood while Tio staggered backward. Fortunately, Yue's automatic regeneration kicked in to heal all her injuries, while Tio's naturally high endurance kept her from taking too much damage. But they weren't out of the woods just yet.

"Holy shit, are you kidding me?"

Hajime's expression was stiff as a board. Yue and the others looked just as stunned. The tower that stuck out of the center of the castle was suddenly riddled with cracks. Furthermore, the sky above the tower was beginning to warp. It looked like it was twisting around itself. Or like someone was trying to twist it apart.

A second later, death descended upon the mortal realm. More specifically, a supergiant grim reaper that looked like the amalgamation of all human pain and suffering appeared from the distortion in the sky. After it followed a three-headed flesh wolf who

had blood vessels that writhed like tentacles running all over its hairless body. And after that came a giant frog covered in noxious slime. Hundreds of bloodshot human eyes were set into its skin, which was dappled with patterns of screaming human faces. Finally, there came a dragon that had rotting human hands and feet growing out of its scaled body. It was wrapped in a corrosive mist that looked like a dark thundercloud.

All of the creatures looked like they'd been specifically designed to make anyone who looked at them go insane. They were all radiating an overpowering aura of bloodlust as well.

"So all the guys up till now were small fry? What a joke," Hajime said with a smile.

"Th-Th-Th-This isn't the time to be s-s-s-miling!" Kaori whimpered, her sanity already at its limits. She stood with her legs pressed together, doing her best not to wet herself in front of the boy she loved. Hajime knew the giant creatures had already noticed them. They may not have looked in Hajime's direction, but it was obvious the monsters' bloodlust was directed at him and his friends.

Worse, all of them were powerful enough to make even Hajime, the man who'd crawled out of the depths of the abyss, tremble. Not only that, it looked like they still hadn't reached the peak of their strength, since their presence continued to grow stronger.

"Yue, Tio! Buy me five, no, three minutes! Please!"

"Mmm... Leave it to me!"

"I swear by my title as a guardian of the people that I will not let them lay a finger on you!"

"Shea, keep the small fry at bay! Show them what an overpowered rabbit can do!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

"Kaori, keep it together!"

"I-I'll do my best!"

Hajime smiled fearlessly. As long as the comrades he trusted were still willing to fight, not even the proverbial end of the world could scare him. For her part, Remia didn't even scream when she saw what was coming. She just continued praying for Myu's safety. Hajime grasped her hand, and she squeezed back with more force than he thought dragons had in them. Just as Yue and Tio were about to launch themselves toward the grim reaper, and just as Hajime was about to activate his Limit Break to more effectively control his Ornis—

"Asura."

A powerful wave of gravity crushed everything around Hajime and the others, while neatly avoiding them. At the same time—

"Ability nine, Thunderlord's Judgment."

"Serpent Vortex!"

“Void Fissure!”

Powerful bolts of lightning and a swirling vortex of water that looked like an industrial excavator slammed into the grim reaper, while a spatial fissure that looked strong enough to rend the heavens themselves struck the other three giant creatures. Hajime and the others looked on in speechless amazement. Some of those spells had included gravity and spatial magic. Hajime glanced questioningly at Yue, and she dumbly shook her head.

That makes sense, it didn't sound like her voice anyway... But then, why does it feel familiar...? In the midst of his confusion, Hajime heard the voice of the person he'd been searching tirelessly for.

“Mommy! Daddy!”

“Myu!?”

As the miasma was blasted away, Myu came flying from across the other side of the wall. While Hajime had believed she was strong enough to pull through, he'd still been worried she might have gotten hurt or traumatized or something. But it turned out Myu was perfectly fine.

“What the hell's with that glowing whale!?”

“He's my friend!”

“Are you sure you're okay!?”

“I'm fine! Oh, and I brought really strong *reinforcements!*”

So she's fine AND she brought help? Hajime's jaw dropped open. The whale shot straight toward Hajime, and once it was close enough, Myu hopped off, knowing that Hajime would catch her for sure. Kaori hurriedly dispelled her barrier, and Hajime caught her. Myu gave Hajime a lovable grin, and his dumbfounded expression turned into a wry smile.

“Remia, I think your daughter's gonna grow up into one hell of a woman.”

“Good grief! Do you have any idea how worried I was!? Just, good grief!”

Hajime handed Myu over to Remia, who was repeating ‘good grief’ over and over like a broken record. She hugged her daughter with tears in her eyes. But then, a second later, a new wave of bloodlust assailed Hajime and the others. The grim reapers had returned, and it looked like their four bosses had already revived. Donner was enough to take out the smaller reapers, but it lacked the firepower to do any real damage to the supergiant reaper. It bore down on Hajime, swinging its massive scythe.

Kaori had dropped her barrier when Myu had arrived. So instead, Hajime summoned his shield and used it to guard. But it turned out there was no need to guard at all, as Myu's “reinforcements” took care of it.

“That weapon uses blastrock and electricity to shoot out pellets at high speed, huh? And is that a Treasure Trove? Man, you’ve got some pretty cool artifacts.”

Oscar flung his black coat back as he used his umbrella to block the giant reaper’s scythe. He turned back to look at Hajime, who instantly recognized the bespectacled face.

“Oscar Orcus? No way...”

“I see... So just as Myu-chan said, you really do know about us.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses. He gave Hajime a curious look while he muttered, “Ability two, Wall Burst.”

His umbrella glowed gold, and a second later, the reaper’s scythe had been pushed back. Naturally, Hajime didn’t let the opening Oscar created go to waste. He stood back-to-back with his fellow Synergist and pulled Schlagen out of his Treasure Trove. He then turned around and blasted the giant reaper with his rifle.

Meanwhile, the revived frog was being slowly shaved to bits by a powerful vortex of water shaped like a giant snake. There was an arch of water a short distance away from the stream, and sitting upon that arch was a familiar dagon woman. Hajime also recognized the grim-looking man who’d just teleported right next to Oscar.

“Meiru Melusine and Naiz Gruen, too? Wait, please don’t tell me that—”

Unfortunately, Hajime’s prediction was spot-on.

“Whenever the world is in danger, I’ll be there to save it!”

A girl whose voice Hajime knew all too well fell from the sky right in front of him.

“The world’s beloved, prettiest, most beautiful mage...”

Miledi lifted a leg, put her left hand on her hips, and made a peace sign with her right hand. She gave Hajime a perfectly choreographed wink and finished, “Miledi-chan is heeeeeeeere!”

She also used magic to create a rainbow of multicolored smoke behind her. This wasn’t Miledi the golem. She wasn’t wearing a smiley-face mask. This was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Miledi the human.

Hajime was completely stunned. He hadn’t expected Miledi to actually look so beautiful. Truly, it was an absolute waste of good looks. Of course, the fact that Miledi brought attention to it herself just pissed him off. So, naturally—

“Die, Milediiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Huh? Nyowaaaah!?”

Hajime fired at Miledi with Donner, while Shea swung Drucken at her and Yue used gravity magic to try and crush her. Her perfect introduction was ruined by the grudge the three of them held against her after experiencing her labyrinth. Unfortunately, she somehow

managed to dodge all of their attacks perfectly.

“Hey, calm down!”

“Ngh, let me go, Oscar! Do you have any idea how much that woman toyed with us!? Even if this is an illusion or if she’s fake or something, I won’t be satisfied until I’ve blown at least one hole into her body!”

“She’ll die if you do that! I realize your anger’s probably justified but— Hang on, are you breaking through my metamorph chains with just brute strength!? Are you some kinda monster!?”

Oscar had instantly restrained Hajime with his prized Metamorph Chains the moment Hajime had attacked Miledi, but he was prying them apart using his bare hands.

“You calm down too, little bunny. I realize Miledi-chan is possibly the most annoying person in the world, but— Hang on, are you really a rabbitman!? How’re you so strong!?”

“Do you have any idea how many times she drenched me in that disgusting liquid!? I need to give her at least one good punch!”

“Miledi-chan, what did you do to these people!?”

Meiru tried to contain Shea inside a water prison, but Shea smashed through it with one swing of her warhammer. Meanwhile—

“I-Impossible. You can use spatial magic!? Just who are you!?”

“Miledi must die... I won’t show her any mercy.”

Naiz tried to use spatial magic to lock Yue in place, but she used her own spatial magic to cancel his spell, causing his eyes to widen in surprise. Miledi had no idea what she’d done to these people, but she realized the grudge they held against her ran deep.

“I don’t know what I did, but I’m really sorry!”

Miledi went down on all fours while floating in the air. Even when apologizing, she refused to let her head touch the ground.

Meanwhile, Tio, Kaori, and Remia were completely out of the loop. They glanced around in confusion, Tio taking care of the swarming monsters while Hajime’s group and Miledi’s group bickered. Surprisingly, it was Myu who restored order.

“Jeez! What are you doing, Daddy? You too, Shea-oneechan, Yue-oneechan. This isn’t the time to be fighting!”

Myu’s angry, high-pitched voice carried quite well across the battlefield.

“N-No, but Myu—”

“Bad Daddy!”

“Ah, okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

“Woooooow, you’re letting a little girl order you around! Hey hey, how does it feel getting scolded by your own daughter? Bahahahaha!”

“Miledi-oneesan?”

“Hyaah!? I-I’m sorry.”

Hajime and Miledi hung their heads, thoroughly chastised by Myu. She then went and did the same to Shea and Yue, bringing them back to their senses as well.

“Daddy, we’re almost out of time! We have to save Mister Whale!”

Myu’s expression was more serious than Hajime had ever seen. He could tell this wasn’t some childish prank.

“Everyone, come over here! Yue, Kaori, Tio, make us the strongest barrier you can!”

Yue and the others instantly sprang into motion, and they deployed a combination of Hallowed Grounds and spatial barriers.

“Miledi, Naiz, Meiru. We’re helping them.”

At Oscar’s call, Miledi and the others obediently gathered as well. They placed down their own combination of gravity, water, and spatial barriers. With six extremely powerful barriers protecting the group, even the giant monsters couldn’t hurt them. They roared in frustration as their attacks bounced off the group’s multilayered defenses.

“Alright, Myu. What’s going on? What do you know?”

Hajime knelt down in front of Myu. She took a deep breath, then put a hand on the glowing whale next to her and replied, “This whale is the shadow we saw before. He needs Daddy and Oscar’s help.”

As they’d neared the castle, the whale of light had regained a bit of its power and had been able to communicate with Myu once more. While they’d been traveling to Hajime, it had told them the gist of the situation. Apparently, the whale was the guardian of this destroyed city. Long ago, this city had been brought to ruin by the same monsters that were flooding out of the castle. Those monsters had actually been created by human hands, and the strongest of them made the nigh-immortal Hell Eater Hajime and the others had just recently fought look cute.

But, as it always went in stories like this, the people had been unable to control the monsters they’d created, and brought their empire to ruin. However, they’d at least had the tenacity and the good sense to seal away the monsters they’d created. But to do so, they’d needed to use the whale as a cornerstone.

Now, centuries or perhaps millennia later, the seal had been weakened to the point where it was nearly gone. If the lynchpin of the seal, the tower that the whale was fused with, broke, then the ancient evil horrors would regain their full strength and would start terrorizing people across all worlds and all times.

“Mister Whale’s been waiting this whole time for someone who can fix the seal to come! He said he needed really strong ‘Synergist-creators!’”

This abandoned capital didn’t actually exist anywhere within the

real world. It had once stood where the sea they'd come from was, but the seal had transported it into a gap between dimensions. Basically, this whole space was a city-sized Treasure Trove.

And because the whale was also the product of that ancient civilization, it too possessed the power to transcend space and time. However, its power had been greatly weakened, so it could only transport people here once, and only people who visited the particular stretch of sea the capital had once been on. Meaning this was the only chance anyone would ever have to repair this seal. Restoration magic wouldn't be enough to do it because a lot of the damage to the seal was too old to be realistically recovered. It would take more mana than anyone in the world possessed. Which was why the whale had needed to bring in people who could analyze the seal and rebuild it from the ground up, namely Synergists who could use creation magic. Not only that, Synergists with more skill and mana than either Hajime or Oscar possessed individually.

"So it brought you and Oscar-oniisan together even though you're from different times, Daddy! It made a miracle!"

Myu spread her arms wide, and for a moment Hajime wondered if this really was Myu. The glowing whale, which was apparently an avatar of sorts of the seal's guardian, illuminated Myu with its light. As if Myu was the oracle it had chosen to speak through. Everyone present couldn't help but be awed by how dazzling Myu looked.

After she finished her story, Hajime took a deep breath. His mind was full of questions. Whether or not all the stuff about the seal was real, how it had managed to move Miledi and the others across time, as well as why they had to clean up someone else's mess.

However, there wasn't enough time to think about all this. The tower had begun leaning precariously, and it was so cracked that it was a wonder it hadn't collapsed under its own weight already.

Hajime shrugged his shoulders, ruffled Myu's hair, and said, "Guess we've gotta fix it then."

Miledi, the leader of the Liberators replied, "Alright, let's do this. Don't worry, my O-kun's the greatest Synergist in the world. We've got this in the bag!"

She grinned proudly. Miledi had absolute faith that there was nothing Oscar couldn't do.

But upon hearing that, Yue scowled and replied, "Excuse me? That's an even bigger joke than your existence. The greatest Synergist in the world is my Hajime."

Miledi wasn't about to let that pass uncontested. She gave Yue a glare that could curdle milk. Yue countered with an icy smile.

The two of them stared each other down, trying to look as intimidating as possible. Seeing that, Hajime and Oscar exchanged

glances and smiled sympathetically at each other.

They could worry about these petty squabbles later. Right now, Myu's request took priority. That desire was what kept everyone cooperating for the moment.

"Yue, you're in charge while I'm off fixing this seal or whatever."

"Miledi, it's the same as always. Make sure no one gets in the way of my work."

Hajime grinned fearlessly, while Oscar adjusted his glasses with a slight smile. Naturally, Yue, Miledi, and the others all nodded confidently back to Hajime and Oscar. With that, the strongest team in all history was formed. And the one to start things off was Naiz.

"Myu, where do we need to go?"

"To the top of the tower, Naiz-oniisan!"

"Got it."

Oscar quickly brought out his Metamorph Chains and bound everyone together. A second later, the party was floating a short distance above the tower's summit. Naiz had teleported everyone in an instant.

"He didn't even use a gate..." Yue muttered in surprise.

As they started to fall, Miledi used her gravity magic to soften everyone's landing. The tower's summit was about ten meters in diameter, and the only object on it was a one-meter tall obelisk. It was riddled with countless cracks, and it looked like it was moments away from shattering completely.

"That thing! That's what we need to fix to fix the seal!" Myu shouted, just as monsters started flooding the rooftop.

"Go, Hajime! Myu, Remia, stay with Hajime! Kaori, put up a barrier! Shea, take care of any enemies that get past Tio and me!"

"We're counting on you, O-kun! Meru-nee, you provide support from above! Nacchan, you take the other side!"

Yue and Miledi shouted out orders while Hajime and Oscar ran over to the obelisk. Myu and Remia stuck close to Hajime, with the glowing whale at their side, and Kaori quickly cast a barrier over all of them. A second later, the giant grim reaper bore down on the shimmering barrier.

"Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Shea yelled out her signature battle cry and batted the giant reaper's scythe away with her hammer. The force of the blow was so great that it echoed through the roof and sent the reaper flying.

"Whoa, is that girl really a rabbitman!?" Miledi shouted in surprise. Even as she spoke, she flew high into the air and used a Heavensfall to send the swarm of flesh-wolves and their three-headed leader to the ground. They fell straight down, not even scraping the side of the already weakened tower. At the same time, Miledi also

used gravity magic to support the tower's foundations.

Wow... Her magic's so precise. And yet she casts so quickly.

For the first time in her life, Yue, the vampire princess who'd been considered the greatest mage of her generation, was jealous of someone else's magical talent. However, she wasn't going to let that get her down. Learning that there were heights she had yet to reach just stoked her desire to improve. And this was the perfect chance to watch and analyze the legendary Liberator who'd developed the techniques Yue was so fond of. She'd make Miledi's skills her own, and improve them even further!

Wow, this girl's shaping her mana so quickly... Is she learning how to do that from me? After just watching me do it once?

In the same way that Yue was impressed by Miledi's skills, Miledi was impressed by Yue's. Thanks to Myu's earlier explanation, she knew that Yue was from a different time than her. Meaning that normally, the two of them would never have met. That went a long way to explaining why Yue could use gravity magic too. And since Yue and the others knew about her and the Liberators, Miledi had figured out they must be from the future too. *It's such a waste! I've finally met someone who can rival my magical ability, and this is the only time we'll ever get to see each other!? This sucks so much!* Miledi thought regretfully to herself.

"Hey, what's your name?"

Of course, Miledi had heard Hajime say Yue's name multiple times. But she felt compelled to ask anyway. This girl used the same magic as her, possessed as much talent as her, or possibly even more, and it was clear from how strong Yue's bonds with her comrades were that she was someone who understood compassion. Miledi had to hear Yue introduce herself with her own words.

If only she'd been born in our era. She would have been such a reliable comrade! The thought was so vexing to Miledi that it nearly brought her to tears. Yue sensed what Miledi was thinking from her expression, and she turned to face the Liberator with a serious expression.

"Yue... The world's strongest vampire princess. And... the one who inherited your magic, Miledi Reisen."

"Ah... I see. So that's how it is."

Miledi felt Yue's back lean against hers. It was warm and reassuring.

During the battle, they'd gotten closer and closer until eventually, they were fighting back-to-back. Yue had no way to know what Miledi was thinking as the two of them crushed monsters with gravity magic in perfect sync. But she could tell that Miledi trembled a little when their backs touched.

“Well if you’re my successor, then I guess I’ll show you an example of how the great Miledi uses gravity magic! Think you can follow along with the lesson?”

“Don’t get cocky, Miledi... I’ll surpass you before you know it.”

Grins tugged at the corners of both girls’ lips. With the greatest gravity magic wielders of the past and present working together to polish each other’s skills, no enemy could stand against them.



Meanwhile, Tio, Naiz, Meiru, and Shea were all covering for each other as they fought, and Kaori provided support from the ground using her healing and defensive spells. Together they kept the horde of monsters away from Hajime and Oscar, who were in the middle of repairing the obelisk.

Damn... This guy's good... Hajime thought to himself. Red sparks ran down his arms as he desperately tried to keep up with Oscar. It was taking everything he had to keep the obelisk from falling apart. Even though he was the greatest Synergist alive in the present, he was having a tough time figuring out how to repair the seal. In fact, when he'd seen how complicated and precise the layers of magic circles that composed the seal were, he'd almost wanted to give up. To make matters worse, the obelisk itself was created from some ore he'd never seen before, and it was a hundred times more resistant to magic than sealstone.

Every time he repaired one section of the obelisk, another gave way, and when he repaired that yet another section fell apart. It was like trying to solve a puzzle that kept changing itself.

"Don't panic. No matter how complicated something looks, its fundamental building blocks have to be simple. All we have to do is figure out how all the threads connect, then neatly tie everything together," Oscar said calmly, though there were beads of sweat pouring down his forehead. Despite how resistant to magic the obelisk was, Oscar was easily able to weave his mana into it. With every passing second, Oscar understood more about the obelisk and grew closer to learning the secrets of how to repair it.

Damn! So this is what the legendary Liberators were like? His skills are on a whole different level compared to mine!

Unknown materials? Magic circles that had never been seen before? Those meant nothing to Oscar. So long as he could analyze the structure of the obelisk, he'd be able to repair it completely. That was just how godlike his skills were. Hajime couldn't help but grit his teeth in frustration when he saw how big a gap there was between their abilities.

"Visualize, then create. That's what we Synergists do. Isn't that right?"

Complete, utter perfection. The closer Synergists grew to that ideal, the more beautiful their creations became. So it was only natural for them to chase after such perfection. A true Synergist was someone who could create something beautiful that would last for time immemorial.

If you call yourself a Synergist, you should be able to manage that much... Oscar's expression seemed to say.

“Alright, bring it on!”

Hajime’s lips curled upward into a grin. He bared his teeth, his eyes shimmering with determination. He reached up and ripped off his eyepatch. Normally it didn’t bother him, but right now it was just in the way. If he wanted to analyze Oscar’s skills perfectly, then his Demon Eye needed to be free from all obstructions.

“Ah!? That eye of yours...”

The moment Oscar saw Hajime’s eye, he understood what it did and how it worked.

Hajime’s grin grew wider and he said, “I’m gonna make your skills mine. Now show me what a legendary Synergist can do.”

For a moment, Oscar was dumbfounded, but then he returned Hajime’s grin.

“Very well. Steal my techniques, if you can!”

“Watch me, Master!”

“I don’t recall ever taking any disciples as arrogant as you.”

As the two bantered with each other, they stepped it up a notch. Oscar took the lead, while Hajime followed using his Demon Eye. Hajime learned quickly and started using his mana more efficiently with each passing second. Not only that, he learned new ways of imbuing his mana into different objects. Once he learned Oscar’s methods for analyzing materials and the flow of mana, he refined them to make them faster and even more precise. But Oscar wasn’t about to let himself be done in by his disciple that quickly. Every time Hajime learned from and refined one of Oscar’s techniques, Oscar took that and refined it even further.

Oscar was wrapped in a nimbus of sunlight-golden mana while Hajime, who’d activated his Limit Break during their contest, was covered in deep crimson mana. The two Synergists were shining beacons of light in this miasma-covered world of darkness.

“Analysis complete. You’re better at imbuing creation magic into objects than I am. I’ll switch to supporting you now,” Oscar said curtly.

“Roger. I’ll start the repairs. We’ll do the deepest magic circles later. Start with the fourth one,” Hajime replied just as curtly.

“Got it.”

The two of them stared at the obelisk with absolute focus. They were like doctors performing a never-before-attempted life-saving surgery. It took perfect coordination and every ounce of skill they possessed to repair the obelisk with the pinpoint precision needed for such a complex artifact.

The light coming off the two Synergists grew brighter. Golden and crimson sparks ran down their arms as they used up every last ounce of mana they had. Had there been anyone watching the castle from a

distance, it would have looked like the light of dawn was cresting above the horizon, pushing back the darkness.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The horde of monsters let out a collective scream.

“Oooh, the tower’s starting to get fixed!”

“Heh... I knew Hajime could do it.”

“Bahaha! Didn’t you hear them? He called O-kun his *master*.”

“And then, right after he said he’d switch to supporting Hajime.”

The two mages crushed the remaining monsters with gravity magic, then glared at each other with icy smiles. Meanwhile, Kaori and Meiru showered everyone with restoration magic. It seemed Kaori had learned a thing or two from Meiru as well, as her magic had gotten much faster and more powerful as well. Within seconds, everyone’s wounds had been healed and their mana restored.

In a last-ditch attempt to prevent the seal from being repaired, the dragon opened its maw to fire a blast of corrosive breath at the party. But before it could, Shea hammered it with a series of explosive slugs, blowing it to bits. From the other side, the three-headed wolf tried to shoot pellets of blood at the party while the frog tried to launch its spit at them. But Shea stopped both of them as well.

“Wow, I can see everything. This is some really useful magic!”

During their fight, Shea had unlocked Prophetic Visions, a derivative skill of her special magic Future Sight. It allowed her to see a few seconds into the future, and this she could activate at will. It was thanks to it that she was able to efficiently crush all the monsters just before they attacked. She’d seen Meiru use restoration magic to project visions of the past, and had attempted to do the reverse version of that for herself, to outstanding effect.

“It appears this fight is coming to a close.”

“There’s nothing more dangerous than a wounded beast. Let’s end this before they try anything.”

The end was in sight. There was no need to remain on the defensive now. Tio gathered all of her remaining mana and fired off her most powerful breath attack yet, while Naiz unleashed another Void Fissure. The monsters trying to stop the tower’s repair at all costs were sent tumbling into oblivion. A second later—

“Transmute!”

Oscar and Hajime cast the final transmutation needed to fix the tower completely. Veins of golden and crimson light shot down the tower, and with a deep rumbling, the entire thing righted itself, the deep cracks disappearing like they’d never existed.

“Vwoooooooooooooooooon!”

The triumphant call of a whale echoed through the city.

“Mister Whale!” Myu shouted happily, raising her hands into the

air. Had Remia not been holding her, she probably would have run up to the whale.

For its part, the whale grew brighter and brighter until the entire world was covered in light. It shot up into the sky like a firework and dispelled the dark clouds covering the city with its blinding radiance.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screams of hatred and malice filled the air as the last remnants of the monsters were burned away. They turned to dust in the light and the black mist that had permeated throughout the city was sucked into the tower. The resulting gust of wind that came from it was so strong that Yue and the others were forced to land atop the tower, or risk being blown away.

Hajime held on to Remia and Myu to keep them from being pushed off the tower. Oscar clung to his glasses with one hand and shouted, “The repairs should be done! Myu-chan, what happens now!?”

Myu closed her eyes for a second, then shouted loud enough to be heard over the wind and the dying screams of monsters, “We go home! Back to our original time!”

Suddenly, a whirlpool of light shot up from the tower. Hajime and the others were swallowed up by particles of light. Everyone present knew that this miraculous encounter in a strange city was coming to an end. Just like when they’d come here, everyone could feel their consciousness slipping away. It felt as though they were being dragged to the bottom of the ocean, again.

Unable to bear parting just like this, Miledi shouted, “Yue-chan! Can you... Can you guys live life the way you want to!?”

She had to know if her earnest wish that the people of the future would be able to live freely had been granted.

Yue turned to Miledi, looking deeply into those kind but unwavering sky-blue eyes. After a brief pause, she replied, “Yep... You wanted a world where people could live freely, right? Don’t worry!”

Yue gave Miledi the biggest smile Hajime had ever seen, then hugged Hajime’s back. The two groups, past and present, were pushed further apart as the sandstorm of light started guiding them back to their respective times. At this point, they were too far apart for Yue to make out Miledi’s expression. But even so, Yue could somehow tell that Miledi was smiling. That Yue’s words had bolstered the Liberator’s resolve.

However, Hajime didn’t want everyone to part on such a somber note. There was no need for sad farewells between them. So he shouted, “Miledi, I’m still gonna pay you back for flushing us down that damn toilet!”

“You’re still going on about that!?”

“And Oscar! That hydra is overkill! Learn some self-restraint, you bastard!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Even Yue and the others looked surprised by Hajime’s remarks. But a second later, they realized what he was going for. Myu, Yue, Shea, Tio, Kaori, and even Remia, shouted lighthearted farewells to the Liberators who’d aided them in this adventure.

So naturally, Miledi replied, “Let’s... Let’s meet again in the future!”

Miledi’s hopeful farewell was the last thing anyone heard before the light took them and they all lost consciousness.

Hajime awoke to the sound of waves lapping against his submarine. He opened his eyes and saw he was lying atop the deck.

“Huh? When did I fall asleep?”

As he muttered that, he realized there was something heavy lying atop him. Looking down, he saw Myu and Remia resting on his chest, their hands gripping his. He turned to either side and saw the rest of his party was also all lying next to him, sleeping peacefully.

“What the hell’s going on...?”

His memories felt fuzzy. When did he fall asleep here... and why? He remembered they’d gone out to search for the Shimmering Ocean, then...

“Mmm...”

Yue slowly opened her eyes next to him. A second later, so did Myu and everyone else.

“Did we all just doze off or something?” Hajime muttered to himself.

But that didn’t seem right. Looking down at his watch, he noticed almost no time had passed since the last thing he remembered. Hajime slowly got to a sitting position, careful not to push Remia or Myu off.

“Are you guys okay? Does anyone else feel like something’s off?”

“You feel it too, Hajime?” Yue replied quietly.

“Mrrr... I feel weird too. Like we forgot something important.”

Myu hugged Hajime, looking oddly lonely. It appeared no one had any memories of what had happened after they fell asleep.

“By the way, Hajime-kun? Why are you hugging Remia-san?”

“Huh!?”

Remia looked down in shock. Realizing she was resting in Hajime’s arms she hurriedly pulled away. There was no gentle smile or “Oh my” this time. In fact, she was blushing.

What’s with that reaction...? Kaori and the others thought suspiciously.

“No clue. I was hugging them when I woke up.”

Even Hajime was confused, which was a rarity. Remia's sudden change, combined with the fact that everyone's memories were hazy, meant *something* must have happened, they just didn't know what. Yue and the others cocked their heads in confusion.

"Ah! Master, look!"

Tio suddenly pointed to the ocean in surprise. Looking over, everyone saw that the sea was sparkling. As far as they could tell, the shimmering extended endlessly. At the very least, it reached all the way to the horizon.

"What the hell's going on?"

First their memories, now this. Under normal circumstances, Hajime would have been extremely wary right now. But for some reason, Hajime and the others weren't worried at all. It was as if they knew there wasn't any danger.

Motes of light rose up from the shimmering sea, ascending to the heavens. It was like Hajime and the others had been transported to a sea of golden stars.

"Look, Daddy! It's a fish!"

Myu was pointing to a spot where the motes of light had gathered to create the shimmering form of a small fish. It swam freely through both the sea and the sky, parting the golden light in its wake.

More sea creatures started to form, and within seconds the sea was full of glowing life, floating through the air and water. Whenever one of them touched Hajime or the others, it burst into particles of light, then reformed a short distance away. It was such a wondrous sight that everyone could only watch in stunned silence.

Eventually, a giant whale surfaced from the depths of the glowing sea.

"Vwoooooooooooooooooooooon!"

Its warm light was reminiscent of a sunny forest floor in early spring. Everyone instinctively knew they would be safe in its gentle embrace. Though it said no words, everyone could tell that the whale of light was immensely grateful to them.

"The Shimmering Ocean..." Hajime muttered quietly.

No one contradicted his assertion. As Hajime stared at the massive, hundred-meter long whale and its entourage of sea creatures, Hajime suddenly realized something.

"Is it just me, or do we suddenly have more mana than before?"

"Mmm? Ah, you're right..." Yue muttered.

Shea, Tio, and Kaori all nodded as well. Suddenly Myu looked up at them and said, "That's its way of saying thanks."

A second later, Myu blinked in confusion, unsure why she'd said that.

"Umm, I think I also know a new way to use my Future Sight too

now,” Shea said timidly.

“Mmm... Come to think of it, I understand how to control mana better now.”

Hajime closed his eyes for a second, analyzing his current state.

“Damn... I feel like I just leveled up my Synergist skills, too. I bet I can finish my airship and laser now.”

What the hell happened while we were asleep!? Hajime didn’t understand any of this. But while none of this made sense—

“But it feels like something really good happened! Like we met a bunch of really cool people!” Myu shouted happily. Hajime and the others exchanged glances, then smiled in agreement to each other.

“O-kun! Nacchan! Meru-nee! I dunno what happened, but I feel really happy all of a sudden!”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I feel like I got a really cheeky disciple.”

“Indeed, I feel good.”

“I feel like I met a new angel.”

Far in the past, a group of four stood in the same place, watching the exact same scene. Of course, Hajime and the others had no way of knowing that. But they didn’t need to, so it was fine.

Though Hajime found his utter lack of curiosity about his missing memories curious, his attention was currently focused on the glowing sea. The giant whale let out another grateful cry, then turned its back on them. It dove into the ocean, much like a real whale would. The sparkling water rose up in a giant pillar as the whale displaced it, and the shimmering sea creatures danced around where the whale had submerged.

“Oh yes, Daddy! We have to make a wish!” Myu shouted as she suddenly remembered what the legend had said.

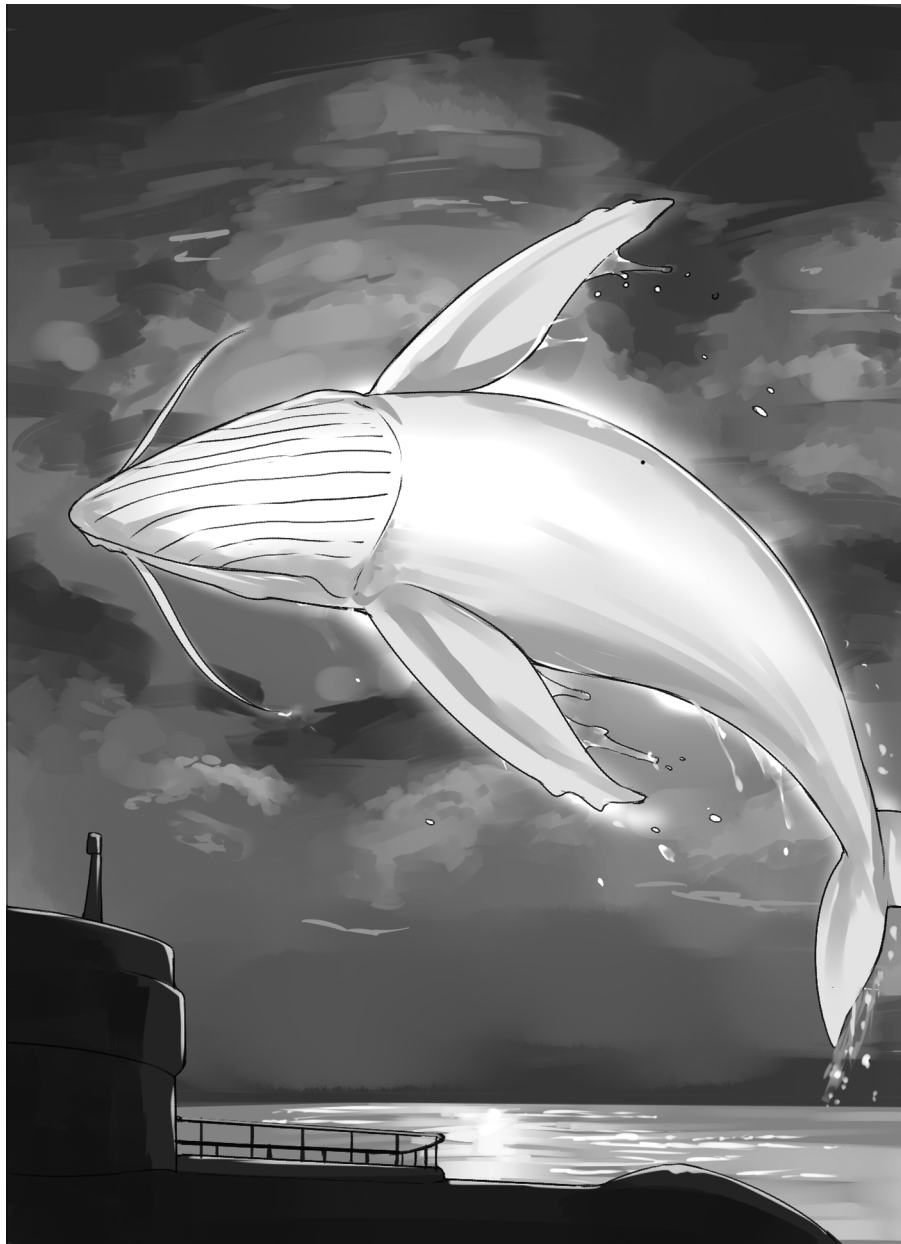
“Those who encounter the Shimmering Ocean will have their wish granted.”

Hajime and the others nodded, and they all silently made their wishes.

“I wish I get to be together with Daddy forever!” Myu alone voiced her wish out loud, and when Hajime heard it he suddenly felt like making another wish aside from asking to find a way home.

Please teach me what I should tell Myu when I have to leave.

In the end, Hajime’s greedy second wish was granted after many sleepless nights spent wracking his brains, and Myu’s wish was granted in the form of Hajime’s promise.



Afterword

Hey everyone, resident chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome, here. Thank you very much for picking up this Arifureta short story compilation.

How did you like it? It contains most of the short stories written from volume 1 to volume 5. To be honest with you guys, I wrote all of these as bonuses to go with in-store purchases, so I never thought they'd get published as a volume in their own right. As a result, the chronology and setting and contents are all over the place. I've basically been writing these with the same mindset that I'm writing the after stories on Narou. So I'm sorry if there are any inconsistencies with Arifureta canon. I realize some of you were probably wondering how some of these short stories fit within the timeline of Arifureta, but please don't worry too much about it. All these events might have happened during some of the time skips in the main volumes, but if that doesn't make sense, then I guess they might not have. Either way, I just wrote what I thought would make for interesting stories to fill the gaps in time within the main series.

I won't blame you guys for thinking I was having too much fun messing around with these stories, but I hope you at least enjoyed them. There might be some of you out there who've already read all of the short stories that came with each of these volumes, and if there are, I'm eternally grateful to you loyal readers. You guys are the best.

Unfortunately, I'm sure if such readers do exist, you were probably pissed when you heard there'd be a compilation volume coming out and that you didn't need to buy each volume half a dozen times.

So, by way of apology, I've written one entirely new short story for this volume. Incidentally, I called it a short story, but it's more than 40,000 characters long, so I'm not sure if it really qualifies as a "short" story anymore. It's nearly a quarter of the whole book.

I, uh, guess it's more of a special story or a super story than a short story? Sorry guys, I really am just having way too much fun writing these things. I just hope you all had as much fun reading them as I did writing them. Nothing would make me happier.

I tried making these short stories a lot sillier compared to the main series, which is meant to be serious. Anyway, since I seem to have a lot of empty afterword pages left, I decided I'd write down some commentary for a few choice short stories.

I'll start with the new short story I wrote for this volume...

—The Miraculous Meeting and the Phantasmagorical Adventure

The truth is, I actually used an existing short story as the base for this one. Those of you who happened to be at the Overlap sixth-anniversary event might have picked up the short story I wrote for that, The Mysterious Daydream. That's what I used as the base for this one.

The Mysterious Daydream also has Miledi, Yue, Hajime, and Oscar all meeting each other, but I had to limit that one to just 3,000 characters, and I didn't have much time. I really wanted to make it a longer, more fleshed-out story, so when I heard I was getting a short story compilation volume, I decided to expand on that short story. Of course, if everyone remembered their meeting it'd mess up a lot of things in both Zero and the main story, so as much as it pained me, I had to make it so they'd forget about what happened at the end of the adventure. However, I wanted to make sure that *something* concrete remained from their encounter, which is why things ended up the way they did. Also, those of you who are keeping up with the web version probably already know this, but Myu is someone who attracts all manner of strange things to her, so I decided to make her the centerpiece of this story. Those of you who read the "Afterword's Afterword" for volume seven that's on Overlap's homepage (it's a short story you can read by answering a survey) will know that a tiny piece of the Hell Eater actually survived and that Myu's already made it her friend. Myu's a pretty... scary girl in some ways.

—The Holy Goddess' Descent unto Paradise

This one's a short story about Kaori and Shizuku from back when they were on earth. I didn't mention this in the short story itself, but in truth, Kaori tried doing the same thing in a bunch of other stores, and she and Shizuku got blacklisted from all of them. They also all happen to be stores Hajime frequent. Anyway, there are rumors among store owners that there are two girls who have an abnormally intense interest in porn games. Incidentally, Hajime's dad, Shuu Nagumo, runs a video game company, while his mom, Sumire, is a popular shoujo manga artist. So it's only expected that Hajime would grow up to be a dyed-in-the-wool otaku. Plus, with all the times he's helped his mom ink backgrounds, he's actually a pretty good artist himself. And thanks to all the times he's had to help his dad, he's become a decently skilled programmer. In fact, his mom's assistants and his dad's coworkers often come to him for help when one of his parents starts getting carried away.

—Dreams of Family

Whenever I think of isekai stories, I can't help but think of the

families of the people who've been transported away. Personally, I imagine it must be much more painful for them when the protagonist suddenly gets transported to another world, compared to when they die and get reincarnated. Because the family still holds out hope that the protagonist might return to them, it's even more painful than if they'd just gotten the closure of knowing the protagonist is dead. That's part of why I wanted to make the ultimate goal of Hajime's journey to be returning home. And the reason I wrote this short story was because I wanted to both explore and maybe heal a little of the pain felt by those left behind when Hajime got summoned. If you asked me what the main theme of Arifureta was, I'd tell you it's about Hajime's journey to become the strongest and so on, but if you think about it, on some level, it's also about never giving up on your family.

—The Handsome Rabbit and The Iron Boy

This one's just one of those alternate timeline stories. As I'm sure you've all guessed, it's based on Ironman. Honestly, if you think about the title of Arifureta, this would probably be a more fitting way for Hajime to get stronger than eating a bunch of monsters. (Whoops.) The rabbit's kind of in a similar place too. I think you'll see what I mean once the next mainline volume comes out.

—A Store Owner Like This... Might Really Exist

Since I was asked to write this short story for the Tsutaya store, I figured I may as well make it about them. Incidentally, I'm the kind of guy who rents all his movies. If I really like something I've rented, I'll buy it for good when I go to return it. I feel like that's the best way to buy movies. And so, thank you so much for letting me rent all your movies, Tsutaya! It's actually one of my favorite stores, so I had a lot of fun writing this story.

—A Certain Peaceful Hero Party

I figured this would be a good place to talk about Ryutarou's origins. The truth is, he's based on the boss who shows up in the second Die Hard movie. That guy's probably my favorite villain in the whole series.

—Midnight Tag and The Most Beautiful Pervert Dragon

Chronologically, The Most Beautiful Pervert Dragon comes before Midnight Tag. I just wanted to write a short story about why Hajime likes riding on Tio's back so much.

—A Falcon's Daughter is Still a Falcon

I literally just wanted to write a story about a badass child sniper.

—The Arifureta Magic Academy and Arifureta Fairy Tales series

These are the stories I turn to when I'm out of ideas. Which, as you can see, happens frequently enough that both of those have become mini-series of their own. Fortunately, the setting of both means I can pretty much do whatever I want, so they're fun to write.

And now I'm out of pages, so that's enough for the commentary.

Sorry for the blatant self-promotion, but I'd like to use a bit of the remaining space to remind everyone that volume four of Arifureta Zero will be releasing next month, so pick up a copy if you're interested. The final ancient magic user will be making her debut. The plot's going to be speeding up too, since we're near the climax of the story. I hope you all follow Miledi and the others' story to the very end.

Lastly, but never least, it's time for the acknowledgments. As always, thank you Takayaki-sensei for your wonderful illustrations. And congratulations on the release of the Arifureta artbook! I'd also like to thank RoGa-sensei for his godlike artwork on the Arifureta manga, as well as Mori Misaki-sensei and Kamichi Ataru-sensei for drawing the zero and everyday life spinoffs. I'd also like to thank my editor, my proofreaders, and everyone at Overlap who helps make the published version of Arifureta possible. And, of course, thank you, dear readers. Both those of you who picked up this volume, and those of you who support me on Narou. Let's meet again in another Arifureta volume!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Arifureta Magic Academy Field Trip

A delicious scent wafted through a sunlit clearing in a forest.

“Daddy, that looks really tasty!”

“That’s because curry’s my specialty.”

Myu, the new dagon student, inhaled deeply and Hajime, her de facto father and also a student at the same academy, smiled at her. The clearing was dotted with other groups of students who were all making their own curry. Today was the magic academy’s field trip, the once-a-year excuse for students of all grades to mingle.

Aiko, the teacher on duty, surveyed the clearing. Everyone seemed to be having fun. But all the students were also pointedly doing their best to ignore Hajime’s group as much as possible.

“U-Umm Hajime... isn’t it about time...?”

“Waaah! This is so embarrassing. I’m sorry, Hajime-kun. I won’t do it again, so please let me rest.”

“I can’t believe I made such a rookie mistake. How pathetic.”

Yue, Kaori, and Shea were all sitting on their knees in front of Hajime, and each of them had a stack of super-dense metal plates resting on their laps. There were also metal plates affixed to their heads, and each of those plates had the words, “I’m a bad kid who wasted food. This is my punishment, so don’t talk to me” engraved on them.

It wasn’t hard to imagine what had happened. Each of them had wanted to be the one to cook curry for Hajime, and a fight had broken out. During their scuffle, they’d overturned all of their pots, including the one Myu had been using to make her own curry. Naturally, Hajime had been incensed, and so he’d punished the three girls accordingly. Incidentally, Tio, the principal of the academy, had been strung up to a nearby tree and left alone. A few of the newer underclassmen had tried to ask whether it was okay for the principal to be treated like that, but their seniors had all shushed them and explained that no one asked such questions.

“How are things going, everyone? Are you almost done with your curries? It’s almost time for—”

Unlike Yue, who was an absolute failure of an educator, Aiko did her best to make sure everyone’s activities were going smoothly. But before she could finish, three female students suddenly ran up to her.

“Ai-chan-sensei! What do we do!? Tamai’s group has gone missing!”

They were Yuka, Nana, and Taeko, all students who’d volunteered to keep watch around the forest.

“Calm down, Sonobe-san. Start from the beginning.”

“Well... Tamai, Aikawa, and Nimura were all getting bored of patrolling, so they all went into the obstacle cavern to have some fun. But no matter how long we waited for them, they didn’t come back out!”

The obstacle cavern was a man-made cavern built by the owner of the forest. It was meant to serve as an enjoyable obstacle course that should have been easily clearable, even by a child. There was no way Tamai and the others, who were all upperclassmen, should have gotten stuck in there. And knowing that, Aiko’s expression suddenly grew grim, as did Hajime’s.

“I-I’ll go take a look!” Aiko shouted hesitantly. It appeared dinner would have to be postponed.

“Ah. Daddy, shouldn’t you let Yue-sensei—”

“Those people aren’t there, Myu. Understood?”

“Oh, okay.”

Yue and the others stared at Hajime in shock. He gave them one threatening glance, promising vicious retribution if they dared to move. Then, after seeing that they’d been sufficiently cowed, he dashed over to the obstacle cavern. When they reached it they saw a sign that read, “Welcome one and all to Miledi’s wonderful obstacle course! For a limited time only, student entry is free!”

Hajime couldn’t quite put his finger on why, that sign irked him to no end.

“Sensei, Miledi’s the name of the forest owner, right?” Hajime asked pensively.

“That’s what I was told. But I didn’t hear anything about this special student deal. There certainly wasn’t any such deal last year. At any rate, everyone else stays here. I’ll go take a look inside!”

Aiko took a deep breath, then resolutely stepped forward. But before she could enter the cavern, there was a loud metallic clank. A second later, there were three loud screams and the floor around Aiko and the students parted to either side like a pair of double doors. Hajime instantly grabbed Myu and tried to flee to safety by using the heads of other students as stepping stones. Unfortunately—

“Wha!? Gravity magic!?”

He felt a massive pressure forcing him down, and Myu let out a panicked squeal. In the end, Hajime was forced into the hole along with all the other students.

“Huh? I’m not hurt? Oh, there’s a cushion here,” Aiko muttered,

looking blankly down at her feet. However, after a few seconds she returned to her senses and shouted, "Is anyone hurt!?"

Looking around, she saw that all the students had landed on cushions as well, and that everyone was unharmed. Though they were all very confused, much like Aiko.

"H-Hey, there's a light up ahead!"

"Is that the exit? Shit, I'm totally suing the owner of this place!"

Hiyama, Saitou, Kondou, and Nakano all dashed forward without stopping to take stock of the situation. A second later, the floor beneath them shot upward, launching them toward the ceiling. As they screamed in terror, it opened up to let them through. And once they passed through, the ceiling closed up again and their screams faded away.

"....."

An oppressive silence filled the room in their absence. Eventually, it was broken when someone gulped.

"Aiko-sensei, is this how the obstacle course is supposed to be? Was it like this last year?"

"Definitely not!"

It seemed someone had switched out the obstacle cavern for something different. Before anyone could ask anything else, shining letters appeared on one of the cavern's walls. They spelled out, "Welcome to Miledi's wonderful obstacle course! I remodeled it just for you guys! Now it's as dangerous as a labyrinth! I worked hard to make this, so you all better enjoy it to the fullest! Oh, some of you may end up buried here permanently but... that's just part of the fun!"

"....."

Cold sweat poured down the students' foreheads. The fun, easy obstacle course had been replaced by a deadly labyrinth, of all things.

"Y-You've gotta be kidding me! I can't stay here! I'm going home!" Suzu shouted, then tried to go down a different route than the one Hiyama and his friends had chosen.

"Wait, Suzu!" Eri yelled as she ran after her. Before Aiko could stop either of them, another trap activated.

"Bwah!?"

"Fwaaaaah!?"

White webbing fell from the ceiling. And in their haste to escape from it, they tripped over the fine threads and the web easily bagged the two girls, dragging them up to the ceiling. Like before, it opened to receive both of them.

"Noooooooooooooooooooo, I hate spideeeeeeeeeeeeeeeers!" Suzu wailed.

"Ugh, get this disgusting shit off of me! I'm gonna fucking kill you vermin!" Eri shouted.

Hang on, was Eri's personality always like this? the students thought to themselves. But there wasn't time to dwell on the matter.

"P-Pull yourselves together, guys! Ryutarou, Kouki, we have to save Suzu and Eri!"

Ryutarou was the first to react. He leaped forward, planning on using the nearby wall as a foothold to jump off of toward the ceiling. But the moment his foot touched the wall, it flipped around. Without even time to scream, he barreled into the room on the other side. And, at the same time, the wall emitted a cloud of gas that put Shizuku and Kouki to sleep. As they collapsed to the ground, the floor beneath them turned to quicksand, sucking them under.

"Sh-Shit...."

"Daddy..."

This obstacle course of Miledi's was dangerous enough to make even Hajime sweat. And that made Myu very worried. Just then, more shining letters appeared on the wall.

"Oh come on! You guys are still at the starting line and you've already lost this many students? This year's class sure is a disappointment. Bahahaha!"

The students' worry instantly transformed into anger.

"Well, if you're having this much trouble, I *guess* I could let you give up. But you have to admit defeat if you want out! I wonder how it'll feel, begging for mercy with your pride in tatters? Do tell me if you decide to back out!"

Bang! Hajime's bullet slammed into the wall, blasting it and its blasted letters to pieces.

"You guys know what to do, right?" Hajime said coldly, turning to the other students.

"Yeah," they all muttered resolutely.

"Let's go. We'll show this bitch just how good our class really is."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

And so, Hajime led his army of enraged students into the cavern's depths. One hour later, Yue and the others grew tired of waiting, so they went to see what was taking Hajime so long. Upon reaching the cavern, they found a disheveled Hajime by the entrance. He was facing the other students and shouting, "Find Miledi! Make sure you drag her out here alive! We're not gonna let her die until she's experienced true hell!"

Remia's True Intentions

"Oh? What's that, Nagumo-kun?" Shizuku asked, pointing to a black, square lump of metal sitting on the living room table. The group would soon be leaving the Frost Caverns, so Hajime had

emptied his pack to reorganize it.

“Oh that’s... a good luck charm,” Hajime’s expression softened as he spoke. Hearing that, Suzu’s eyes lit up and she clapped her hands together.

“Ah, it’s one of those, isn’t it? You keep it in your breast pocket at all times, so when someone tries to stab you, you can pull it out and say, ‘This thing saved my life!’”

“Do I look that cringe to you?” Hajime replied, flicking Suzu on the forehead. She flew backward, and Kaori quickly cast healing magic on her with an apologetic smile.

“The metal thing is just a puzzle box, actually. The good luck charm is inside,” the healer explained.

“You... really treasure whatever’s in there, huh?”

“Well, it was something he got from Myu-chan, so it makes sense,” Shea chimed in. “I got one, too!” she said excitedly and started rummaging through her Treasure Trove. After a few seconds, she pulled out a glittering white seashell pendant. Yue, Kaori, and Tio had all received similar seashell pendants, and they proudly took theirs out. Hajime reached for his box, deciding to unveil his charm as well.

“Transmute.”

The azantium lid split apart, revealing a smaller box nestled inside. This box had a small indent in one corner; a slide puzzle. Hajime dexterously moved the tiles around into the correct configuration, and the front of the box fell open with a satisfying click. Within lay yet another box.

“What are these, matryoshka dolls?” Shizuku asked incredulously.

Hajime ignored her and entered the correct combination to the dial lock that protected this box, then opened the box inside that as well. That one shot out a barrage of poison darts, which he dodged. The box after that blasted lightning at him, and the one after that required fingerprint authentication, and the one after that needed a voice-activated password, and so on and so forth.

“How many boxes are there!?”

“Just how important is that charm to you!?”

Eventually, Shizuku and Suzu couldn’t hide their exasperation any longer. Fortunately, Hajime was finally on the last box.

“Oh? You have two? A white one and a peach-colored one?”

“Yeah, but this one’s from Remia. She probably just made it because Myu asked her to.”

Technically, Remia had helped make the charms Yue and the others had, too. She’d asked a craftsman friend of hers to make the chains for the seashell pendants, so every one of the charms were a joint Remia-Myu production. However, the fact that Hajime had two charms meant his were special in some way. Even if he tried to play it

off, Yue and the others knew his second charm hadn't just been an afterthought.

"Is that really the only reason? No, I can say with certainty that it is not!" Yue said definitively.

"Why are you talking like that, Yue? Anyway, she probably just wanted to thank me for bringing her daughter back to her. She's a lot like Myu in that regard—"

"You don't understand a thing, Hajime-kun!"

This time it was Kaori who objected. She pointed at Hajime, mimicking the pose of a certain great detective. As Hajime opened his mouth to argue, Shea and Tio piled on him as well.

"I'm pretty sure there's a reason other than gratitude!"

"Indeed. Though even my discerning eye cannot see through her docile facade, my woman's intuition is telling me that there is definitely something more to that charm she gave you!"

"Wait, hang on. Are you telling me there's something between Nagumo-kun and Myu-chan's mother?" Shizuku asked as she shot Hajime a look of disbelief and he sighed in exasperation.

"Like hell there's anything between us. Sure, she calls me 'darling,' but she only does that for Myu's sake. Besides, you can tell she's joking, since her attitude's been like that from the start and—"

"Five days after we arrived, she seemed to be more bashful around you..." Yue interjected quietly. Shea and the others nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, that's true. She was always nice to Hajime-san, but it didn't feel like she saw him as a man until then."

"Yep. I guess it's because she's an adult? It definitely felt like she was trying to be considerate of us and not take the whole married couple act too far."

"Indeed. Whenever she deflected our questions about whether she was serious about Master, she seemed quite composed."

"However!" Yue, Kaori, Shea, and Tio said simultaneously.

"After the fifth day, she didn't have that composure anymore!"

"When we made fun of her relationship with Hajime-san after that, she actually got flustered!"

"Yeah! Before, when Myu said things like, 'I wanna sleep together with Mommy and Daddy!' she'd just say, 'Of course' without batting an eye. But after that day, she started inviting everyone to sleep together!"

"Indeed, she started keeping her distance from you after the fifth day onward, Master. But the fact that she felt the need to do that proves there is more to her feelings!"

One after another, the girls started giving their testimony. Shizuku glared coldly at Hajime.

“Nagumo-kun, I can’t believe you!”

“Whoa, you really are a playboy, Nagumo-kun. I didn’t think you’d manage to make even a widow fall for you!” Suzu whistled.

“Calm down, Yaegashi. It’s not what you think. We didn’t do anything... Well, I guess something happened on the fourth night that I can’t really remember, but at the very least we didn’t do anything improper that I remember.”

His excuses were starting to get flimsy. Shizuku’s glare grew colder, and Hajime took out his anger on Suzu with another forehead flick.

“Our memories of that night are missing too, so Hajime-kun isn’t to blame for that, but still, the fact remains that something changed after that night. And that’s a problem.”

“Why, you ask? Because Remia-san is Myu-chan’s mom! Meaning...”

“If Remia-san’s really after Hajime-kun, she’ll easily be able to steal the wife spot away!”

“While we will be relegated to mere concubines!”

“I never said anything about making you a concubine,” Hajime replied with an exasperated sigh, then took a thick book out of his Treasure Trove.

Still glaring, Shizuku asked, “what’s that?”

“It’s an accessory encyclopedia. I filched— I mean, borrowed— it from the royal library.”

“You just said ‘filched,’ didn’t you!? I can’t believe you’re just stealing the kingdom’s stuff!”

“Now, that’s just unfair. I did ask the princess for permission to borrow it, you know. Though, I didn’t tell her I’d be borrowing it for life.”

“That’s called stealing! Poor Lily!”

Hajime ignored Shizuku and opened up the encyclopedia.

“I’m pretty sure different ornaments have different meanings, kinda like how flowers do back home.”

Hajime was hoping he’d be able to find the seashell Remia had given him in the encyclopedia so he could prove once and for all that there was no romantic intent hidden within the gift.

“Hmm... Here it is. In the language of seashells it means, ‘I wish you luck in your travels and pray for your safe return.’ Heh, Myu sure picked out a good shell for Remia...”

Hajime grinned to himself as he skimmed through the encyclopedia.

“Anyway, that proves the shells were just platonic gifts,” Hajime said with finality. But Yue and the others weren’t convinced. They snatched the encyclopedia and read through the entry for themselves.

“It can also mean, ‘I hope to see you again’...” Yue muttered.

Shea turned the page and said flatly, “And ‘May fortune smile upon you.’”

Kaori added, “Also, ‘I’ll never forget you.’”

“The peach-colored seashell is similar to the white seashell in that they both represent affection. However, the peach shell has a more romantic nuance to the affection than the white one.”

The girls all glared at Hajime again.

“Seriously, you guys are overthinking this. Besides, I’m not even interested in Remia.”

Suzu, who’d finally recovered from the forehead flick, said, “You say that now, but I bet she’ll be all over you in a few more months, just like all the other girls!”

“Taniguchi, outside, now. It’s time I taught you a lesson.”

“Huh!? Wait, stooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo! Shizushizu, save meeeee!”

Hajime grabbed Suzu by the scruff of her neck and started dragging her out of the room. But while he’d tried to sound imposing, it had looked more like he was fleeing the stares of the other girls.

The remaining girls exchanged glances.

“So we’re agreed that Remia goes on the blacklist?” Yue asked quietly.

“Absolutely!” Everyone else said in unison.

Remia’s gentle smile flashed through all of their minds.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: Little Mermaid

Deep under the sea lay a village of mermaids, hidden from human eyes. Within that village lived a mermaid princess. Though she was called a princess, she wasn’t actually royalty. She was just cute. Incidentally, her mother was an extremely beautiful single lady. At any rate, this mermaid princess was a source of great joy to the people of the village. Especially the men of the village who wanted to treat her to snacks and have her call them Daddy. One day, when the princess was playing tag with these men of rather suspicious motivations, she ended up swimming pretty far away from the village.

“Th-That was close... They’re trying really hard today...”

The mermaid princess would never call any of them Daddy. She was determined to protect Mommy from them at all costs. Suddenly, she heard a huge splash from the surface of the ocean.

“Wh-What happened!?”

Looking up, she saw there was a fierce fight going on close to the water’s surface. The ancient creature of the deep, the Hell Eater, was locked in mortal combat with a human. Normally, the Hell Eater

wouldn't have had any trouble with a lone human. But this one was different. It pumped the Hell Eater full of black tar, then blew the giant jellyfish up. As the jellyfish turned into a rather ugly fireworks display, the human who'd been fighting it fell into the sea.

"Oh no!"

The mermaid princess quickly swam toward where the human was falling. Then, she grabbed hold of him and made a beeline for the surface. Eventually, she poked her head out of the water and saw that the boat the man had been fighting on had been severely damaged during the explosion. And so, she placed the man on the remains of the boat and shouted, "Are you okay!? Hang on, I'll—"

The mermaid princess suddenly trailed off when she got a good look at the human she'd rescued. He had white hair and wore an eye patch. But most importantly, she could tell at once that he had the strength of a great white shark and the kindness of a whale. He was a true prince. It was love at first sight. Myu knew that this was the man she would call Daddy. She'd been growing tired of the lecherous men who'd been chasing her day after day, but at the same time, she *had* been longing for a father figure. Still, she wouldn't just let any random guy be Mommy's husband. But this man... Well, he was clearly her fated father.

But first, she needed to save him. She grabbed hold of the man once more and started swimming to shore. Once he was safely on land, she slapped his cheeks a few times, but he didn't respond. Thinking he might have swallowed seawater, she elbowed his stomach in the hopes that it'd get him to throw it up. As she was attempting various other lifesaving maneuvers, she sensed someone nearby. She couldn't let humans see her, or Mommy would scold her! The mermaid princess hurriedly dived back into the water and poked just a little bit of her head out to see what was going on. If anyone tried to steal her prince away from her, she'd fight them tooth and nail, regardless of what the rules said.

"A-Are you alright!? Don't worry, I'll cast healing magic on you right— Oh my, you're so handsome!"

A woman dressed in a priestess' robe had arrived. Though she looked saintly, the mermaid princess could tell she was the kind of woman who'd chase the man she desired to the ends of the earth. The woman cast healing magic on the mermaid's prince, and he slowly opened his eyes.

"Huh? Where am I? Did you rescue me?"

"That's right! You washed up here and I healed you! So now, you have to marry me!"

"Like hell I do. Anyway, come to the castle, I'll give you your reward there."

“I don’t need money, all I want is your hand in marriage!”

“Oh great. Figures I’d get saved by one of the crazy ones...”

In the end, the prince ended up going back to the castle with the priestess without ever learning it was the mermaid princess who’d actually saved him.

“I’m not letting you have Daddy!” the princess swore to herself as she made a temporary, tactical retreat. She was going to visit the witch who was squatting in the mermaid village.

“Miss Witch, Miss Witch! Please make me into the prince’s daughter!”

“Mmm!? The prince, you say? Hmm, this might just be my chance...”

After a few seconds, the witch smiled at the mermaid princess.

“Very well, I shall use metamorphosis magic to make you appear to be his daughter. However...”

“I know, you want something! What is it?”

The mermaid princess was wise. She knew there was no such thing as a free lunch. As she stared into the mermaid’s resolute gaze, the witch fidgeted bashfully.

“Once you’ve become the prince’s daughter, can you call me Mommy?”

“No way!”

The witch was taken aback by the mermaid princess’ blunt refusal.

“P-Please, can’t you at least consider it?”

“I’m sorry, but I already have a mommy!”

But despite the mermaid princess’ clear refusal, the witch was undaunted. After all, she was in love with the prince. However, the world believed she was evil, which was why she was hiding out at the bottom of the sea. Meaning this was her only shot at making the prince hers.

“I’m fine with being your unofficial second Mo—”

“Not happening!”

The whole time she was shooting the witch down, the mermaid princess was smiling brightly.

“Ah, alright... I’m sorry I asked for the impossible...”

The witch slumped to her knees, defeated at last. She looked so forlorn that it wouldn’t have been surprising if she let the current just sweep her away.

“U-Umm, Miss Witch! I can’t call you Mommy, but I can try to ship you with the prince! Will that work?”

“It most certainly will.”

The witch recovered almost instantly, her mermaid disguise melting away. Meanwhile, the mermaid princess returned home to leave her beloved Mommy a letter. It read, “I’ve found the perfect

Daddy. I need to convince him to let you live with him, so I'll be gone for a while."

And with that, the witch and the mermaid were ready to set off.

Since this mermaid princess was perfectly capable of speech once she found the prince, all she had to do was tell him that she was the one who'd carried him to shore and he happily took her in as his daughter. After that, she spent her days in the castle, living with her newfound Daddy. Of course, she didn't forget to pester him about Mommy.

"Daddy, Daddy, can Mommy live in the castle too?"

"Hm? Of course she can. If she's grown up, she'll have to work, but there's plenty of work here to do. I'm sure I can find her a job in the castle."

"Thank you Daddy! I knew I could count on your harsh but realistic methods!"

"Oh, stop it, you're making me blush!"

"By the way, what do you say to marrying Mommy?"

"Well, uh, I'll have to think about that..."

The mermaid princess was in no rush. She'd already gotten Daddy to promise to bring Mommy here. Once they started living together, Mommy's natural charm would captivate him in no time. The mermaid princess was confident no one was as beautiful as her Mommy. Oh, but there was one last matter she still needed to settle.

"Also, can the witch who helped me live here, too?"

"A witch, you say? Are you sure she can be trusted?"

"I owe her my life! Plus, she's really nice and cute!"

As promised, the mermaid princess did her best to ship the witch with the prince. She would never go back on her word because she was such a good girl. And thus, the witch and the mermaid princess' mother were brought to the castle.

"Oh my, it really is a castle... That girl sure is something."

Despite her attempt to smile gently like usual, the mermaid princess' mother couldn't hide her shock. Honestly, her daughter's assertiveness was rather worrying. On the other hand, the witch was extremely nervous. At long last, she'd be meeting the prince of her dreams. A few minutes later, the prince came down to greet the two of them.

"H-Hello... I'm the witch."

"Greetings, witch. I'm the prince. Now, I realize this is rather sudden, but I've fallen in love with you at first sight. Please marry me."

Though the prince's sudden proposal came as a surprise, the mermaid princess was quite happy about the sudden development. It meant she'd fulfilled her end of the bargain already. All that was left

was to let her mother work her charms, and the mermaid princess' life would be perfect. Unfortunately, life never went as smoothly as people wanted it to.

"I'll never hand the prince over to some witch!"

The priestess everyone had forgotten about suddenly burst back onto the scene. Things were getting heated.

"Choose! Either give up on the prince... or I'll stab you with this knife and throw you to the bottom of the sea!"

The priestess held her hand out and a knife— no, a sword, suddenly appeared within it. In fact, there was another sword in her other hand as well. It appeared this priestess was a master of dual-wielding as well.

"You'll be the one swimming with the fishes!"

"Bring it on! Just sit there and watch, Prince! I'll take care of this dirty witch!"

There was a series of resounding explosions as the priestess and the witch began fighting over the prince. The prince watched on as his castle was destroyed by the two women.

"M-My Mommy is a much gentler person," the mermaid princess said timidly.

"I see... That's reassuring."

The prince looked kindly down at the mermaid princess' mother. She blushed slightly, seemingly pleased with the attention.

In the end, the mermaid princess' mother, the witch, and the priestess all lived happily ever after with the prince. At some point, an overpowered bunny girl and a perverted dragon joined his harem as well. Still, while their life was quite crazy, the mermaid princess was happy to be surrounded by so many people.

(Forced) Metamorphosis

Some time after clearing the Frost Caverns, Hajime and the other men went into a separate room to prepare for their upcoming departure. Meanwhile, the girls all relaxed in the living room. Shea, who was lying on a sofa, stretched languidly, making her massive boobs rise up prominently. A short distance away, Tio and Shizuku were chatting. While they weren't doing anything to emphasize their own assets, they were quite large as well.

"Tch..." Yue clicked her tongue in irritation. Kaori, who was sitting next to her, turned around in surprise.

"Wh-What is it, Yue?"

"It's nothing... I'm not thinking about the time Shea called me washboard flat or anything," Yue replied in a low voice.

She obviously was. *Wow Shea... I can't believe you had the courage*

to actually say that, Kaori thought to herself. Her expression stiff, she tried her best to cheer Yue up by changing the topic.

“O-Oh yeah! I still need to practice metamorphosis magic some more! Do you think you could show me some pointers, Yue? I want to know how you managed to change your hair color—”

Suddenly, Yue turned to Kaori, who flinched. Ignoring her reaction, Yue stared intently at Kaori.

“Kaori!”

“Eeeek!? Wh-What is it, Yue? You don’t have to get that close, you know!?”

Yue cupped Kaori’s cheeks in her hands and brought her face close enough that they could kiss.

“You’re a genius! I never thought of that! I could kiss you right now!”

“Please don’t! And can you let go of me?”

Yue carelessly flung Kaori away from her and started concentrating. She seemed unaware that everyone else was watching her.

“Mrrrrr... Like this? No, that won’t work. How about this? Still no good! Dang it, I need to focus here! I’m the strongest vampire in history, I can do this! Hnnnnnnnnnnnngh!”

Golden mana swirled around Yue, who seemed to be concentrating even harder than when she’d helped Hajime make the Crystal Key. *What the heck is she trying to do?* everyone else thought.

“Y-Yue, what are you doing?” Kaori asked timidly, spurred on by Shizuku’s pleading gaze.

“Kaori... I’ve finally discovered the true essence of metamorphosis magic.”

“Umm... I thought you did that a while back?”

“Fool!”

Controlling her rising anger, Kaori patiently asked, “Okay, but what do you mean?”

Yue, who was massaging her boobs said with a completely deadpan expression, “Listen... metamorphosis magic is capable of transforming one’s appearance.”

“I know. That’s why I asked you to show me how you changed your hair color earlier...”

“And that means I can make my boobs bigger, too!”

“What did you just say!? Yue-oneesama, please teach meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Suzu roared as she ran up to Yue like she was the only oasis in a vast desert. Kaori gave the two of them a sad look.

“You know Hajime-kun doesn’t care about boob size, right Yue?”

“That’s right! And Suzu-san, you’re already cute enough as it is,

you don't need to change how you look!" Shea added.

"Calm yourselves, you two. Larger breasts bring more cons than pros, so there's no reason to waste your time trying to—"

"You can use it to make your skin smoother, too..."

"Please teach me!" the girls shouted simultaneously. All their previous warnings and misgivings had been thrown out the window.

Yue smiled at them and shouted, "Do you guys want to be pretty!?"

"We do!"

"Do you all want perfect figures you can maintain without having to exercise or diet!?"

"We do!"

Metamorphosis magic had the power to achieve all that and more. Having understood that, the girls started concentrating harder than they ever had in their lives.

Ten minutes later, Hajime came to check up on them.

"Hm? It's pretty noisy in there. Hey guys, what's all the fuss about?"

The moment Hajime opened the door, Suzu lost her concentration and her mana spiraled out of control. That, in turn, caused Yue and the others to lose control of their mana as well, creating an unstoppable chain reaction.

"What the hell is thiiiiiiiiis!?"

Their mana converged on Hajime, enveloping him in light. Yue and the others turned guiltily toward him, wondering what effect their magic would have. Eventually, the light faded, revealing Hajime's transformation.

"I-It's been a while since something scared me that bad. Hm? How come my clothes feel tight?"

Hajime suddenly realized that he'd both grown taller, and more muscular. He unbuttoned his shirt to give him room to breathe and brushed his hair out of his eyes. Though he didn't know it, those gestures highlighted his transformed figure, which was that of an extremely attractive, middle-aged man. It seemed the combination of the girls' magic had aged him up a few decades. They stared blankly at him, their eyes wide open.

"Hm? Hang on, my voice has changed too... and my eyesight feels different... Hey, what'd you guys do to me?"

No one answered. They were still too stunned. Though everyone except Suzu also seemed to be blushing. Seeing as he wasn't going to get a reply, Hajime grabbed a mirror to look for himself.

"What the hell!? I'm an old geezer! Seriously, what did you guys do!?"

Hajime glared at Yue and the others. However, his glare had the

opposite of the intended effect.

“Adult Hajime is... good...”

“Awawawawah! Being that sexy is cheating, Hajime-san!”

“E-Ehehehe. I see. So this is what Hajime-kun is going to be like in the future. After we get married, this is what I have to look forward to... Ehehehehe.”

“Y-You mustn’t look at me like that, Master. If you do, I’ll be unable to control my— Haaah... Haaah...”

“Hajime... D-Don’t look at me. You’re making me feel weird...”

Naturally, Hajime smacked them all upside the head.

“You could stay like that a while longer, you know...” Yue muttered despondently.

“Just hurry up and undo this.”

Yue begrudgingly started casting something to fix the situation. Unfortunately, she still wasn’t used to metamorphosis magic, and she overdid it a little. This time Hajime came out looking like—

“The fuck!? Now I’m a little kid!”

His five-year-old self. His pants and underwear slipped off, leaving him wearing just his shirt. Yue and the others were stunned again, but this time because he was too cute, not too sexy.

“You’re so cute, Hajime!”

“Hey, that’s not fair! I want to hug him too, Yue!”

“There, there, Hajime-san. Or should I say, Hajime-kun? Come here and give Shea-oneesan a hug!”

“A toddler Master! What a feast for the eyes!”

“H-Hajime, come to Shizuku-oneesan.”

The girls started fighting over mini-Hajime, so his patience ran out.

“Cut it out!”

Hajime blew them all away with a burst of mana and reached down to grab Donner, which had fallen to the floor. Just as he was about to hit them all with a few rubber bullets to vent his anger, a horrific realization dawned on him.

“Hm? Shit, my fingers can’t reach the trigger!”

Yue and the others’ eyes lit up. *He can’t resist? He can’t resist!* they all thought simultaneously. They were past the point of reasoning already. Hajime’s cuteness had poisoned their minds. Realizing he was in a bad spot, Hajime decided to flee, but the moment he turned to run, he tripped over his new, much stubbier legs.

“Dammit...” he muttered weakly, tears springing to his eyes. Unfortunately, that just made him look even cuter to Yue and the others. He looked around desperately, searching for anything that might save him. After a few seconds, he found it.

“Taniguchi, put up a barrier!”

He crawled over to Suzu, who was the only person present that looked just shocked instead of crazed. Still a little surprised, Suzu nevertheless put up a barrier to block out Yue and the others.

“Thank you, Taniguchi! I knew you were a good person all along!”

Hajime looked gratefully up at Suzu, the tears now spilling down his cheeks. Suzu couldn’t believe the same merciless guy who gave everyone the cold shoulder and had not an iota of compassion for most people was looking up to her like that.

“H-Hehehe.”

“Taniguchi?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you, Hajihaji. You can count on me!”

“Oh no, not you too!”

Suzu stepped closer to Hajime, then started beckoning him forward. Around thirty minutes later, Kouki and Ryutarou returned to the living room. There, they saw a half-naked toddler Hajime with dead eyes being fondled by a group of cuteness-obsessed girls. Naturally, they quietly left and closed the door behind them.

Myu Remodeling Project

Hajime was fervently transmuting something while sequestered within one of the rooms in the palace at the depths of the Frost Caverns,

“Hm? What’re you doing, Nagumo-kun?” Shizuku, who happened to be passing by, poked her head into the room and asked that question.

Hajime looked over his shoulder and said, “I’m trying to make an artifact that can alter appearances.”

“Shouldn’t you just turn yourself in instead? I’ll go to the police station with you if you want,” Shizuku replied with a straight face, then continued, “Don’t worry, I’m willing to wait for you until you get discharged from prison.”

“What do you take me for? This isn’t for me, anyway. It’s for Myu.”

Hajime unclenched his fist, showing Shizuku the earring resting in his hand. She cocked her head and asked, “Why for her?”

“Think about it, her ears would stand out back home. Shea’s would too, now that I think about it. If the regulars in Akiba found out what she really looked like, they’d all go crazy.”

“I don’t think Akiba’s quite that bad... but well, I get what you’re trying to say.” Shizuku nodded in understanding. Beastmen wouldn’t be able to live peacefully in Japan unless they had some way to hide their true appearance.

“Yeah, basically. Besides, I want to let Myu go to kindergarten and

elementary school in Japan if that's what she wants. And if Remia's gonna join us in Japan, I need to make sure she can go out in public without attracting a bunch of attention..."

"Hehehe. Oh Nagumo-kun..." Shizuku chuckled. She thought it was extremely cute that Hajime was willing to go so far for the adopted daughter he'd run into accidentally. In fact, it was this side of Hajime that had made her fall for him in the first place.

"Is there any way I can help? I'll do anything in my power," Shizuku asked with a smile. She was willing to do anything for the man she loved.

"Really? In that case, could you be my test subject?"

"Hang on a second."

"First, I want you to take a look at this silver pen. It's supposed to erase your memories when it flashes."

"Hang on a second."

"Don't worry, it'll only erase a few seconds' worth of memories. And it won't replace them with fake ones like the memory devices used by agents of a certain alien-fighting agency. But it does have this nifty brainwashing— err, I mean, hypnotic suggestion ability that—"

"Someone, help me! We've got a mad scientist on the loose!" Shizuku screamed. She was no longer willing to do anything for the man she loved. In fact, she was quite scared of him. She wanted to run away from him as fast as possible.

"It's fine, really. Even if something goes wrong, we've got restoration magic! I promise it won't be that bad! I just want to run a few tests! Please, just a few tests!" Hajime said with bloodshot eyes as he slowly stepped toward Shizuku. She took a few steps back, holding her hands protectively in front of her eyes. She'd seen those movies too, so she knew what might happen to her. A few seconds later, Yue and the others dashed into the room.

"Hajime-kun!? What are you trying to do to Shizuku-chan!?" Kaori yelled.

"Just a few memory experiments."

"He's become a mad scientist! No, a mad Synergist!"

"Come back to your senses, Hajime! Heavensfall!"

"Should I cast spirit magic on him as well? I only hope that proves sufficient..." Tio asked. Then, her spirit magic illuminated Hajime's body, which had been crushed into the ground by Yue's gravity magic. Shizuku ran to Kaori and clung to her for comfort.

"Kaorin, how did you and Shizushizu fall in love with Nagumo-kun in the first place?" Suzu asked in disbelief.

"Seriously, how did that happen!?" Kouki and Ryutarou shouted, nodding in agreement with Suzu.

Some time later, Hajime was sitting on the ground before Yue and

the others.

“Have you reflected on your actions, Hajime-kun?” Kaori asked, a hard edge in her voice.

Hajime nodded meekly, then said, “I realize I shouldn’t have tried to use Yaegashi as a test subject.”

“That sounds a bit too much like a rehearsed response for my tastes, but if you’ve really have reflected on—”

“I promise I’ll choose my test subjects more carefully in the future.”

“That’s not the part you’re supposed to be reflecting on!” Kaori shouted exasperatedly. However, Hajime simply ignored her and turned to look at Kouki.

“Hold on, why’re you looking at me!?” Kouki asked as he took a few steps back.

“I was just thinking that of all the people here, you’re the one who might want to have his most recent memories erased.”

“...W-Well you’re wrong.”

“You wavered for a second there, Kouki,” Ryutarou pointed out, which made Kouki awkwardly avert his gaze. “So, why did you make something like that?” Yue asked, curious.

“To help me deal with government officials back in Japan. If you guys want to live in Japanese society, you’ll need to have birth certificates and the like.”

Documents like those were necessary to get health insurance, obtain driver’s licenses and IDs, enroll at a school, and pretty much anything else someone might want to do.

“We’re going to have to forge a lot of data, and I’m an amateur at that kind of stuff, so it’ll be better to make a pro do it and erase their memories afterward.”

“Th-That’s why you made a brainwashing and memory altering device?”

Shizuku wasn’t the only one who looked horrified by that realization. Everyone else did, too. Hajime didn’t seem concerned at all though, and he replied happily, “Yep. And just in case someone tries to kidnap Myu, I’ve made a few weapons for her.”

Hajime pulled out a miniature revolver, a small rocket launcher, a sword, a hammer, a whip, steel threads, a few cross bits, a personalized warp gate, the list went on.

“Are you planning on sending Myu-chan to war!?”

A young girl doesn’t need all that to live peacefully in our society! In fact, giving her all that will make peace impossible! I need to get Myu-chan away from Nagumo-kun before he raises her into a monster! Shizuku thought to herself.

“You don’t get it! A cute girl like Myu’s gonna be targeted all the

time! I can't let her get hurt!" Hajime argued hotly.

At that, everyone, even Yue, gave Hajime a disgusted look. Wondering why they couldn't understand something so simple, Hajime shrugged his shoulders and added, "Look. We already know for a fact there's at least one organization that'll be out to get Myu."

There's no way that's true... Yue thought to herself.

"The Soul Sisters."

Shizuku, Kaori, Suzu, Kouki, and Ryutarou all stiffened up upon hearing that name. The sad thing was, they knew Hajime was right. Yue, Shea, and the Tortus crew only knew of the Soul Sisters that existed in Heiligh, so they were all confused by Hajime's proclamation. They couldn't fathom what that Soul Sisters had to do with Myu.

"Those bastards don't let any men approach Yaegashi, but they also won't allow any one person to act like her younger sister. They believe Yaegashi belongs to everyone, which makes her everyone's older sister."

"Hajime... I have no idea what you're talking about."

Hajime ignored Yue's question, keeping his gaze focused on Shizuku.

"Yaegashi. Do you really think you'd be able to treat Myu like any other kid when she calls you Shizuku-oneechan?"

Shizuku bit her lip. Not only was she a sucker for cute things, but Myu was also Hajime's adopted daughter. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop herself from giving Myu special treatment.

"Who knows what those fanatics might do once they get jealous... I'm not willing to risk an incident happening."

Hajime's argument was starting to win the girls over. But just in case, he flashed his silver pen while their attention was all on him.

A second later, Yue and the others exchanged glances and muttered, "You have a point..."

"Plus, what if someone discovers she's a dagon? Who knows what government organizations will go after her if that happens. Aren't you scared of what they might do? Don't you care about Myu at all!?" Hajime shouted.

This time, he shot a flash of red light out of his pen. Yue and the others' eyes glazed over this time.

"We do care about her!" they shouted in unison.

Firing off one last flash of light, Hajime finished by asking, "Then shouldn't you all help teach Myu how to defend herself too!?"

"Mmm... I'll think of a way to make it possible for Myu to use magic!"

"I'll teach her hand-to-hand combat!"

"I'll show her how to dual wield swords!"

“I’ll teach her the Yaegashi style!”

“And I shall teach her how to turn pain into power!”

“Maybe I can teach her barrier magic!”

“Let’s write all this down, guys!”

“Leave it to me, Ryutarou! I’ll record it all!”

Yue and the others’ eyes were spinning now. Hajime, however, simply nodded in approval and muttered, “Hmm, there’s still room for improvement, but this is definitely usable.”

No one could stop mad Synergist Hajime now. By the time Kouki was done writing down everyone’s ideas, he had nearly a phone book’s worth of pages. When Myu-chan reached earth, she would be a force to be reckoned with.







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